

Introduction: Autonomy in Everyday Life

In liberal societies in the west we generally assume that we are autonomous. We take it to be self-evident that we have the right to make autonomous decisions and to determine the course of our own lives. Moreover, we believe that we have the capacity to lead an autonomous life, to think about what we do and the way we want to live, and to put these considerations into practice. We value this, for we take it that a life in which we are forced to do existentially significant things against our will, at odds with our own decisions – in other words, a heteronomous life – cannot possibly be a life lived well, a good life.

Autonomy has long been a fundamental topic of philosophy, especially after Kant. In contemporary debates, we find, on the one hand, normative theories that offer detailed descriptions of conditions – often idealised – under which an autonomous life is possible. And there are quite a few theories that argue that leading an autonomous life is perfectly unproblematic. On the other hand, though, some theorists express fundamental doubts about both the possibility and the value or significance of autonomy. They may, for instance, attempt to show that living autonomously is quite impossible by pointing out the extent to which each and every one of us is dependent on circumstances and relations that are not of our own choosing.

Autonomy, then, may be morally and legally fundamental for our societies, but it remains largely unclear what exactly this means for our lives. It is, therefore, a pressing question how a plausible notion of autonomy – between the detailed normative theories and advocates on the one hand and the fundamental sceptics on the other – can be developed and justified. What makes this question all the more interesting is the fact that both the normative idea and the fundamental doubt can be described from the perspective of the autonomous person herself. And this is why the issue goes beyond a clash between theories: what is at stake is a *tension between our normative self-understanding and our everyday experiences*.

Even though we usually simply assume that we are able to lead self-determined lives, there are numerous aspects of our lives that we have *not* chosen. In response, we may ask how it could get to this, or we may blame fate or simply our own carelessness. The possibility that we succeed or fail in shaping our own lives is part of our everyday experience. Nevertheless, the idea of autonomy is associated with a *tension* for a wide variety of reasons. On the one hand, the tension can be described as one between the individual pursuit of self-determination and all those things that occur regardless of this striving, the things that simply happen and

seem to present us with faits accomplis. On the other hand, the tension is by its very nature one that is connected to our embeddedness in social relations and our corresponding duties towards others. We cannot be liberated from such demands, nor do we want to be, but still, they are often subjectively experienced as failures of autonomy.¹

In this book, I shall take up a range of different perspectives to consider these various forms of conflict between the possibility and the impossibility of self-determination, between the idea and everyday experience. As a normative ideal, individual self-determination or autonomy is constitutive of our self-understanding and of our ideas of the law and politics – or at least so is individual self-determination in the sense that we can think about what we *really want* in life, that we can adopt a reflective relation to our own desires and beliefs. The fact that in everyday life this autonomy often cannot be achieved, the question why and under what conditions it is thwarted and the puzzle why these difficulties do not alter the necessity and persuasive power of autonomy are the basic themes of the book.

This tension between our aspiration for autonomy and our everyday experiences can best be illuminated in reference to literature. For in areas like this, when it comes to the phenomenology of our being caught up and entangled in everyday life, literary texts are often better at helping us to get to grips with the phenomena than philosophy. The author to whom I would first like to go for advice is Iris Murdoch, a writer and philosopher both.²

It's not like that. One doesn't just look and choose and see where one might go, one's sunk in one's life up the neck, or I am. You can't swim about in a swamp or a quicksand. It's when things happen to me that I know what I evidently wanted, not before! I can see when there's no way back. It's a muddle, I don't even understand it myself.³

This call for help from the chaos of life, this struggle with the idea of the determinability of one's own life is a central theme in Murdoch's novels. The reality, in which we are always already up to the neck, is, she writes, '*basically incomprehensible*'. Elsewhere, she puts it like

¹ What I refer to here is not, however, the paradox of autonomy that can supposedly be found in Kant – the idea that the very ideal of autonomy cannot even be articulated without self-contradiction. I shall come back to this. For articulations of this idea, see for instance the contributions in Khurana, *Paradoxien der Autonomie*. Critical of the supposed paradox are Kleingeld and Willaschek, 'Kantian Autonomy without Self-Legislation of the Moral Law'.

² I have learnt much from Antonia Byatt's book *Degrees of Freedom*, on Iris Murdoch's novels.

³ Murdoch, *Nuns and Soldiers*: 367.

this: 'The message is, everything is contingent. There are no deep foundations. Our life rests on chaos and rubble, and all we can try to do is be good.'⁴

Chaos and rubble are the counterpoint to self-determination and justifiability. This is, first and foremost, a reference to the fateful coincidences of life that so often hurl Murdoch's protagonists so ominously and despairingly into the disorder of existence. These happenstances express the fact that one's own life cannot be planned; they are experienced as instances of overwhelming power, as circumstances that will confront us in the course of our lives and which we will simply have to accept. This is the first tension that I described above, the one between the conception of self-determination and the feeling that we always face a done deal. What Murdoch has in mind are not primarily the chance circumstances of one's birth and descent, but rather ways in which we are socially entangled, ways with which we are gradually confronted in the course of our adult lives in the form of unforeseen, unfortunate incidents or even in the form of the consequences of our own actions, which we could not have foreseen or at least did not want as such and which we (therefore) often experience as inevitable.

Consider, for instance, Hilary Burde, the protagonist of Murdoch's novel *A Word Child*. Hilary Burde comes from a humble, almost poor background. A talent for language allows him to work his way up: he enrolls at Oxford, wins every possible academic prize and award, passes his finals with a first and becomes a fellow at one of the colleges. Then he falls in love with Anne Jopling, the wife of his patron and mentor at Oxford. The two have a passionate affair, which ends with a car accident caused by Hilary, in which Anne dies. Of course, Hilary has to give up his position in the college. Twenty years later – dull years spent as a civil servant at a nondescript local authority in London – he encounters his former mentor Jopling, who has remarried in the meantime. Entirely against his intentions, Burde falls in love with Jopling's wife once again. Once again, the two develop intimate relations, and once again the affair ends in an accident and the death of Jopling's wife, Kitty.

The reason this is interesting in the context of doubts about the possibility to shape one's own life is described in the words of Hilary Burde:

Yet such things happen to men, lives are thus ruined, thus tainted and darkened and irrevocably spoilt, wrong turnings are taken and persisted in, and those who make one mistake wreck all the rest out of frenzy, even out of pique.⁵

⁴ Linda Wertheimer, 'All Things Considered'.

⁵ Murdoch, *A Word Child*: 221; also see 126.

The events that Burde faces are almost excessively fateful. They do not seem to be under his control; they are coincidences that seem to make a determinable, self-determined life impossible, since it is entirely unclear what under such conditions might count as autonomous, authentic decisions, what it would even mean to act, aim and plan. 'Yet such things happen to men.' Things that happen to us form the counterpart to the aspects of our lives that we determine ourselves.

The thing about fate, however – and Murdoch suggests this too – is that it is not quite that simple. As philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear writes: 'The strange thing about fate is that it does not fit neatly on either side of the me/not-me divide.'⁶ It remains disconcertingly open to what extent such events do not in fact also emanate from our own actions, from our own difficult and complex identities. The compulsion to repeat, for instance, might be attributed to Hilary Burde's own obsessions to a greater extent than he imagines and would like to acknowledge. Besides, these extraordinary coincidences – passionate affairs, tragic accidents, catastrophic repetitions – are only one side of the story. The other, more important form of contingency – or poor planning – is the perfectly ordinary, familiar form, which entraps Murdoch's protagonists in many instructive ways in their own personal unexciting chaos within their own personal, perfectly ordinary everyday lives. And it is primarily this everyday challenge of dealing with one's own decisions, intentions, options, social relations and obligations in a reflective and sensible manner that casts a sceptical light on the scope of self-determination.

This 'fatalistic sense of helplessness', as Murdoch puts it, emerges most clearly in one of her other unhappy protagonists, John Rainborough, a civil servant in some dubious government facility.

Rainborough was sitting in his drawing-room trying to make up his mind to telephone Agnes Casement. He had promised to ring her during the afternoon, but had kept putting it off. It was now becoming, in equal degrees, both essential and impossible that he should do so at once; and as he meditated upon this, turning it into a problem of metaphysical dimensions, it gave him the image of his whole life. For Rainborough was now engaged to be married to Agnes Casement. How this thing had happened was not very clear to Rainborough. That much was certain. Must face up to my responsibilities, said Rainborough vaguely to himself as he contemplated the telephone. Need ballast. All this wandering about no good. Must root myself in life. Children and so on. Marriage just what I need. Must have courage to

⁶ Lear, 'The Freudian Sabbath': 235

define myself. Naturally, it's painful. But best thing really. That's my road, I knew it all along.⁷

Rainborough's reflections come too late: he is already in a muddle and he is not sure how he got into it. His fatalistic sense of helplessness leads to ex post rationalisations ('Must root myself in life. Children and so on. Marriage just what I need.'), which of course are not particularly authentic, since they are only pretend decisions and imaginary desires that in any case are not entirely his. Rainborough clearly knows that he must shape and determine his life *within* these very social conditions, that he needs to act. But he does not do it. Every time, it is already too late.

Now one could object that the only thing this shows is that Murdoch's narrow-minded, middle-class protagonists lack reflection and sense – in other words, that their fate simply reflects failures on their part. They are, the objection might go, persons who fail because they fail to meet a standard which, however, it is perfectly *possible* to meet. This standard of reflection and proper reasons for action, of decisiveness and willpower is not too demanding at all; any halfway sensible person could in principle meet it, and if they did not, it is their own fault. They are agents who do not know themselves sufficiently, even though they could if they tried hard enough; agents who are alienated from themselves, not at one with themselves, not authentic – even though they could be.

This objection, however, comes up short, or at least it is not the whole truth. For the true-to-life way in which the protagonists become ensnared in awkward, difficult or even desperate situations shows that the confrontation with the contingencies and social complications in one's life may very well justify doubt about the extent to which this life can be actively shaped. It is exactly the everyday nature of the characters and their experiences that calls into question whether an individual can truly determine her own actions. For when it is not my decisions, not my actions that determine my life, but rather coincidences and uncertainties, social relations and conditions in which I am always involved anyway, it becomes difficult to trust in the idea that *it could be my own* reasons and *my own* actions that are decisive for my life. The abysses into which Murdoch's protagonists frequently throw themselves, and even their melancholy apathy, which entails doubts about the use, meaning and possibility of determining their own lives – all of this makes clear that a person's lived autonomous (or *not* autonomous, as the case may be) experience in everyday life has a phenomenology and plausibility all of its own. Writers can often describe this better than home-brewed – and often really quite clumsy –

⁷ Murdoch, *The Flight From the Enchanter*: 339.

philosophical examples. For this reason, too, I shall in the following chapters return to examples from literature again and again.

Despite these many convincing descriptions of the various aspects of life that are not self-determined, it is also clear that the leading conception throughout all this is that we *can* in fact determine important dimensions of our own lives. If it was not, Murdoch (or we) would not be capable of describing the failure of self-determination as such at all. It is only in contrast to the normative notion of autonomy that contingencies, obligations, psychological incompetencies and structural obstacles can be characterised as such. Autonomy, so my argument runs, has value and meaning for us because it is constitutive of shaping one's self and world and adopting them as one's own. Nevertheless, ambivalences, self-alienation, the lack of transparency of one's own self and structures that complicate or hinder autonomy belong to our autonomously lived everyday existence. And it is for this reason that we are confronted with tensions.

Personal autonomy, however, has a decidedly political aspect as well. 'I believe that the most important phenomenon that we have witnessed during the revolutions is the rediscovery of personal autonomy', Lebanese author Samir Frangieh explains. And he goes on:

In other words: people are conscious that they can become the makers of their own history. In fact, this is rather new in a region where for decades the individual has been reduced to groups, groups to parties representing them, and parties representing them to their leader. As a result, we found ourselves in a situation in which entire countries were reduced to one person. Examples are Assad's Syria and the entire Arab world, which was merely defined by 10 names. We are talking about 500 million people here, reduced to between 10 and 15 names. This is precisely what the Arab Spring has changed.⁸

It is this political side of personal autonomy that still proves to be explosive, not only when it leads to calls for change in non-democratic situations, but also within liberal-democratic conditions – when the boundaries of government interference in personal autonomy are structurally threatened, when rights are formally valid but materially void; when, in other words, personal autonomy is in danger of being undercut by state interference. Government regulations that infringe on data privacy can be described as such, but so can social structures that can hinder autonomy, such as a patriarchal order. This makes clear that political conditions

⁸ Frangieh, 'The Arab Revolts and the Rise of Personal Autonomy'; cf. Christman, 'Introduction'.

do not only guard negative freedoms, but also positive ones, and that only the combination of both, positive as well as negative freedom, can secure autonomy. The relation between freedom and autonomy will therefore come to play an important role.

What will interest me in the following chapters, however, is first and foremost the problem of individual autonomy in everyday life, the aspect of individual experience and individual capacity. We might call this the *ethical question*, since what is at stake here are the opportunities for an autonomous life, a life lived well. I use the notion of ethics in the broad (Aristotelian) sense we know from people like Bernard Williams. In this sense, ethics does not only involve moral questions, but more generally questions concerning the good life. Still, in later chapters I shall reflect on the social and political side, which shows how the idea of personal autonomy is made possible, and can at the same time be threatened, by political arrangements or social conditions.

At this point, I should briefly introduce the different perspectives that I shall consider in relation to the problem of autonomy. What exactly are we to understand by autonomy, and to what tradition does this notion belong? In the first chapter, I shall address *conceptual questions* and elucidate how we should speak of autonomy in relation to individual freedom, which capacities we should ascribe to an autonomous person and what are the borderline cases of such ascriptions. As we shall see, one is always autonomous together with others.

Are autonomous action and autonomous decision-making necessarily free from *ambivalences*? Must the autonomous person always ‘stand here and be able to do no other’? I shall address the problem of the ambivalent person in the second chapter and argue that ambivalences certainly do not threaten our autonomy in every case. On the contrary: they are a natural part of our self-determined – and rational – everyday life.

In the third chapter I shall ask why exactly autonomy is so valuable and important. And I shall ask this question as a question concerning the relation between autonomy and the *meaning of life*: is a life meaningful only when it is autonomous? And can it be meaningful – and autonomous – without being happy? Must a life be objectively meaningful, or does it suffice when it can be understood as autonomous and subjectively meaningful? Here, too, I shall draw on literary examples in order to better understand tensions and contradictions and in order to show in what constitutive way self-determination and the meaning of one’s life belong together.

When a person acts autonomously, she knows what she is thinking and she knows what she wants. That is, she must know herself in order to be able to act and live in a self-determined

manner. But how can we – after Freud – demand self-transparency as a condition of autonomy? The question what kind of *self-awareness and self-knowledge* we can attribute to an autonomous person in the light of the widespread phenomenon of self-deception will be the topic of the fourth chapter. In considering this I shall also discuss whether new ‘self-tracking technologies’ can actually contribute to self-knowledge and thus support autonomy.

In the fifth chapter, I shall adopt a different perspective on the tensions in our autonomously lived everyday lives: interpreting selected passages from *diaries*, blogs and the like, I shall ask whether the decision-making process that I have identified as characteristic for autonomy is in fact exemplified in such accounts. If we can assume that at least the classical diary is a paradigmatic space of everyday confrontation with one’s own life, it should be possible to show with its help what exactly autonomy means in everyday life. And if we look at blogs and vlogs we can ask the additional question whether this form of confrontation with one’s own self-determination has been changed by and within these new media.

In the sixth chapter, the question of the relation between *autonomy and the good life* will take centre stage. Is it at all possible, in moral philosophy after Kant, to develop a substantive theory of the good life? Is it ethically justifiable to establish standards for judging whether a life is being lived well or is good? By means of an analysis of the question why autonomous choice is so decisive for the good autonomous life, and in reference to the notion of alienation, I shall examine whether it is possible to say anything (critical) about the good life without in doing so questioning the autonomy of those who have chosen, or in any case lead, such a life.

Chapter seven, on the relation between *autonomy and privacy*, will deal with the ethical and political question of the significance of the protection of individual privacy for the possibility of an autonomously lived life. I shall consider why a free, autonomous – and well-lived – life requires the protection of privacy and why we cannot (and do not want to) imagine a life that is led entirely in the public eye. Why is it that a society in which the protection of private life is no longer respected is suffocating and unfree?

In chapter eight, I shall consider the necessary *preconditions* of individual autonomy more generally: the *political and social* conditions under which an autonomous life is to be lived. The focus here is on the relation between individual autonomy and the conditions associated with a liberal-democratic social order. I shall aim to show that there is no necessary and direct connection between the possibility of an autonomous life and these liberal-democratic preconditions. An important question is how the twofold nature of social conditions is best to be analysed, given that they can both *facilitate* and (structurally) *obstruct* autonomy.

For this reason, I shall also discuss the problems of structural oppression and discrimination, as well as the question whether people with ‘false consciousness’ or ‘adapted preferences’ can be autonomous.

At the beginning, I said that we, in liberal societies in the west, take it to be self-evident that we are autonomous and are able to live autonomously. In the ninth chapter, at the end of our journey through the many tensions of the autonomously lived everyday life and the difficulties of a life lived well, I shall defend my arguments in favour of autonomy by spelling out the self-understanding of such a notion, against the critique of those who deem *neither free will nor personal autonomy* – nor moral responsibility – possible. I shall not refute these theories, but I want to show what would be the price of denying the possibility of autonomy. Since throughout this book I take autonomy to be possible at least in principle, it will be useful to end with an attempt to defend the reality of autonomy one last time against this fundamental scepticism.

The different topics of the chapters each require a different approach. Some of the topics will need to be discussed against the background of recent, sometimes rather complicated philosophical debates. For others, this is not quite as necessary, for instance when we ask how autonomy in diaries might be interpreted. Writing about the autonomous life means at the same time writing about the possibilities of a life lived well: this is my thesis, which I shall aim to substantiate in the different chapters; sometimes explicitly, but more often rather implicitly. In all this, I understand autonomy as a necessary condition of a life lived well, though not as a sufficient one. And I shall *not* start by developing a precise theory of autonomy or a theory of the well-lived life, which I subsequently apply to everyday situations in order to see whether we really are autonomous in those situations. I shall proceed in the opposite direction, by considering – after a general explication of key terms – various problems and contexts of autonomy as well as a variety of ways in which it might fail. A theory of personal autonomy as such will develop on the quiet, as it were. And I would like to end by making a few remarks on terminology: I shall speak of a life lived well only when it is autonomous and in addition meaningful and happy.⁹ Although in the philosophical literature authors most commonly speak of the *good* life – and of the search for the good as the happy life – I do not wish to adopt this way of speaking. For the good life (in literature) can be a different kind of life, one that is not self-determined. For this reason, it is important to me to make this possible difference between

⁹ For a different take, cf. Wolf, *Meaning in Life*: 3, who draws conceptual distinctions between the meaningful, the happy and the moral life, to which I shall come back repeatedly in the following. For another alternative perspective, see Seel, *Versuch über die Form des Glücks*: 65–69 and Seel, *Sich bestimmen lassen*: 196–212.

the good and the well-lived life clear. In fact, I shall complicate the matter a little more: a life can be meaningful, but not happy, for meaning is under our control more than happiness is. And small children, for instance, could have good and happy lives that are not, however, self-determined, and since they are not reflected, not meaningful either (though they will be for others). All of this will become clear in the course of the following chapters.

As I indicated above, I shall develop this theory little by little. My aim, however, will not be to use it as a guide, in order to identify the precise conditions of a well-lived life. What interests me in this book is rather the tension between our self-understanding as autonomous persons and our experience that we often fail to succeed in this self-determination, for many different reasons and in many different ways. And I am interested in the question what both – that is, the autonomy as well as the tension – mean for the prospects of a life lived well.

Chapter 6: Autonomous Choice and the Good Life

Chapter 6.5 Alienation (and Authenticity)

Alienation always entails some sort of split: something that should be a unity is not. Alienation is tantamount to distance, to not-being-one, and naturally, it has a negative connotation. A number of authors have already discussed the concept of alienation or self-alienation in connection with the notion of freedom or autonomy – for even when a person has chosen her projects and activities herself, she might understand herself as alienated from herself, not wholly at one with her projects, not truly connected to them. She may have the feeling or belief that she ought to reject them after all.¹ Only the non-alienated life, however, is the life of the autonomous person – only the life which she can stand behind without feeling alienated from it.²

The reason this is convincing surely is that the entirely alienated life cannot be my own good life. Nevertheless, it is important not to go overboard here: we usually consider being alienated from certain aspects of our lives in some weak sense perfectly normal. Certain plans, projects or relationships can belong to a good autonomous life even if we would say that we were alienated from these relationships or projects in some way or for some period. For this reason, the strict unity of the person that is often postulated by authors as part of autonomous agency seems overly ambitious to me. We can experience such instances of alienation towards our own families, towards friends, but also towards our work. Still, this does not necessarily mean that these are not the families, the friends, the jobs we really endorse and really consider right in the context of our self-determined lives. We always have a certain amount of leeway regarding this unity, which means that it may be better to speak of an ambivalent unity. In chapter 2 we already have seen that there is a whole range of attitudes towards oneself, of possibilities of relating to oneself, in which we need not fully identify with ourselves, but can acknowledge, accept or put up with ourselves. Only a true inner rejection – of a project or a relationship – would indicate true alienation and could no longer be understood as part of the good autonomous life.

¹ Christman, *The Politics of Persons*: 143f. On the problem of alienation and in particular its relation to freedom, see the small but informative book by Schmitt, *Alienation and Freedom*. Smith, too, contrasts alienation with the notion of authenticity. On this, cf. below. Also see Schacht, *Alienation*; Jaeggi, *Entfremdung*: esp. 238–256.

² Cf. Christman, *The Politics of Persons*: 153: ‘The idea is that when a person reflects on a trait over time and in a variety of settings and contexts, always yielding neither alienation nor rejection, such reflection indicates the kind of settled character that autonomous agency manifests.’

The idea, in other words, is that I must relate to my life in a certain mode of acceptance, confirmation or identity. If I am to relate to my projects in a way that is as non-alienated as possible, I constantly have to endorse them as my own. This endorsement proceeds horizontally across my current life in all its different roles and aspects. But it also works across time: I make decisions and consider how I would like to act and live always in the light of such a unity. This background, this unity, is crucial as a framework of values and ideas not least because it is one's projects that provide for the happiness and meaning of one's life. For as we have seen, meaning and happiness come on the back of projects. The latter, however, can only lead to meaning and happiness if they are truly meaningful for a person as her own projects. Therefore, the question is what the right way of relating to one's projects – one's roles or practical identities – is. The non-alienated life, accordingly, is one in which one sees (and experiences) the unified and self-determined nature of one's own life in one's endorsement of this life. I would now like to clarify what such a unity and its absence can mean concretely by reference to some brief literary examples.

My first example is to show what it means to no longer be able to experience one's own life as self-determined, as one's own, and why it makes sense to employ the notion of alienated as the opposite of the notion of self-determined, to employ alienation as the description of the absence of an endorsement. In other words, it is an example that is to illustrate the contrast between the self-determined and the alienated life. In his novel *Brooklyn*, Colm Tóibín describes the young Irish girl Eilis Lacey from Friary Street, Enniscorthy, who emigrates to Brooklyn to flee the hopeless situation in Ireland. Eilis is supposed to work at a department store, which will earn her money so that she might perhaps at some point be able to return home. But she is not doing well in Brooklyn, at least not at first. Tóibín writes:

She was nobody here. It was not just that she had no friends and family; it was rather that she was a ghost in this room, in the streets on the way to work, on the shop floor. Nothing meant anything. The rooms in the house in Friary Street belonged to her, she thought; when she moved in them she was really there. In the town, when she walked to the shop or to the Vocational School, the air, the light, the ground, it was all solid and part of her, even if she met no one familiar. Nothing here was part of her. It was false, empty.³

³ Tóibín, *Brooklyn*: 85.

This contrast, the tension between the feeling of belonging and the feeling of not being at one with one's life – or perhaps rather: to have to live one's own life as a strange life –, such a tension can be part of a self-determined life. But if the contrast grows too deep, the alienation too strong, the life too hopeless, then it can no longer be understood as one's own, self-determined – and meaningful – life, as is the case for Eilis. We can see here that alienation should be understood primarily as a threat to the self-determined, well-lived life, even though it can – in a weaker and perhaps muted form – in fact be part of a self-determined life, and certainly to a life well lived, too. Eilis provides an example for the fact that in certain cases it can be exceptionally difficult to draw a line between what measure of alienation one is able and willing to tolerate, and the principle of self-determination.

Let's consider an example that brings the same tension to the fore in a different form. In his novel *Fliehkräfte* (Centrifugal forces), Stefan Thome describes a short scene in which a friend of the protagonist recounts a memory of his father:

'Constancy, I said.' Bernhard had rolled up his sleeves and a weak evening light lit his face. 'That's the sense in which Breugmann reminded me of my father. Cultivated men, true middle-class intellectuals. Know their classics or can at least cite them. My father was not a churchgoer, but on Sunday he always used to wear his tie, even at home. On those days, there would be wine at lunch and fine pastries for dessert. As a child I thought this normal, but now it strikes me as remarkable: the congruence. He wore his life like a tailor-made suit. Or perhaps it was the other way around: life wore him. In any case he was exactly as he was supposed to be.'⁴

This, in any case, is what the son observes – whether this was the way things were from the father's perspective is an open question, of course. Thome has his protagonists formulate an ideal that can be understood as an ideal of the unified, of life moulded into a unity. This is exactly what seems to be the idea of the non-alienated, good life, which the father has chosen for himself. The passage makes wonderfully clear what exactly the unity of a person with his life can mean. It is the exact mirror image of Eilis Lacey's situation.

But is this truly the ideal of the good, autonomous life? Is this the counterpoint to alienation, which obstructs the good life? I think that this image actually shows that the non-alienated life need not necessarily be a uniform and integrated whole. (Thome himself of

⁴ Thome, *Fliehkräfte*: 198.

course leaves open whether his image is to be thought of as ideal at all, be it that of the father or that of the son.) The chapter on ambivalence, too, made clear that we do not always fully stand behind our ideas, desires and plans. We do not normally have a completely unbroken relation to ourselves, our own lives, our practical identities. Our lives do not fit like tailor-made suits; we are not, as Moran puts it, persons ‘who are complacently inhabiting their practical identities as though they were matters of simple membership in a group’.⁵ We can often describe our relation to our projects and roles – to our lives – as one of harmonious unity only in an ironic manner. And yet this unity, life that is in no way alienated, remains the model by which we orient ourselves when we form our practical identities, when we autonomously decide on our projects.

For my third example, I draw on Alice Munro, and here too, the subject is in the first instance a father who, just like in Thome’s novel, believes that in life one should be happy with whatever one has. For Munro, however, it is the mother of the protagonist who is the problem:

My father, who was much better liked than my mother, was a man who believed in taking whatever you were dealt. Not so my mother. She had risen from her farm girl’s life to become a schoolteacher, but this was not enough, it had not given her the position she would have liked, or the friends she would have liked to have in town. She was living in the wrong place and had not enough money, but she was not equipped anyway. She could play euchre but not bridge. She was affronted by the sight of a woman smoking. I think people found her pushy and overly grammatical. She said things like ‘readily’ and ‘indeed so’. She sounded as if she had grown up in some strange family who always talked that way. And she hadn’t. They didn’t. Out on their farms, my aunts and uncles talked the way everybody else did. And they didn’t like my mother very much, either.⁶

What matters to me is not the critical, slightly detached way the daughter views her mother, but the question what we can read here about the autonomy of the mother and her good life. What is it that Munro describes; what happens with the protagonist’s mother? She is clearly alienated from her origins and tries to move into a different sort of life, to live other roles, to choose more ambitious projects than those that were envisaged for her. From the daughter’s perspective, at least, the mother no longer has a particularly harmonious relationship even

⁵ Moran, ‘Psychoanalysis and the Limits of Reflection’: 107

⁶ Munro, ‘Voices’: 287 (in *Dear Life*, Chatto & Windus 2012).

with her own family. Nor is she at all at home in the social circles for which she, in a way, left her family behind. Still, Munro does not suggest that the mother's life is not an autonomous or good life. On the contrary: the pretentiousness with which she obviously plays her social role clearly suggests that she wants to adopt this role; that this role, to her mind, belongs to the life that she now wants to live. The fact that she chose to be a teacher, that she wanted to leave the farm and her family, means that she is somehow alienated not only from the social context of her background, but also from the new context of her working life – she does not belong to it. Nevertheless, Munro implies that this was the right decision for the mother. The distance between the mother and her new role is not to be understood as *mauvaise foi*, as bad faith, for she lives the role exactly as she understands it, exactly as she strives to, and not necessarily with the detachment associated with bad faith.

In Thome, the life of the father certainly displays a greater unity and harmony, which means that it is less alienated than the life of Eilis in Brooklyn and also less so than the mother's life in Munro. Still, the good life need not be a fully integrated whole, as long as there are no fundamental aspects or roles that are genuinely rejected. For this reason, we always attempt to establish this necessary unity between our selves and the projects in our lives, to appropriate our own projects ever anew, to play the roles that we adopt as ours. This need not necessarily mean that we play these roles well, on a traditional understanding of what it means to play a particular role well. MacIntyre argues that the good life for a daughter is to be a good daughter – that is, to occupy the traditional role of 'daughter' as well as possible.⁷ But the good life of a daughter may very well be one that distances itself from the traditional role or that is alienated from it and tries to fulfil it in a different fashion. Munro's example also shows how historically and culturally controversial the role of, say, the mother can be.

The autonomous decision – and the life that belongs to it – that I have discussed in the first paragraphs of this chapter can, in a concrete everyday autonomous life, turn out to be charged with tension, conflicted, precarious and complicated. For such decision-making processes are neither easy nor one-dimensional. The alienation from old roles, the adoption of new roles and self-perceptions, the question what counts as autonomous choice in the first place (did the father in Thome choose autonomously? Did he at least endorse his life autonomously?) – all of these are indications of complicated developmental processes to which people may be subject and which they may themselves initiate in an autonomous way.

⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*: 205; and cf. chapter 15 in its entirety: 190–209.

The complexity of these processes, however, can precisely belong to the good, autonomous life and to the forever new overcoming of instances of alienation. Especially from literature we can learn that we, humans, never perfectly fit the roles, the identities, that our social existence requires of us.⁸

In this context, authors often employ the notion of authenticity to designate the opposite of alienation. The unity that is at stake, the identity that holds together our roles, is the unity of authenticity – the unity that we are and establish ever anew in a true and non-alienated manner. The notion of authenticity already played an important role in the first definition of autonomy. For only when a person identifies with her beliefs and projects and when she acts on the basis of such an identification, from her own reasons, can she be said to be autonomous. Such identification means that she acts authentically (or at least as authentically as possible and necessary). Should it be impossible for a person to identify with her beliefs and projects in this way, then she cannot be authentic and she cannot act autonomously. Such a lack of identification is not equally problematic under all circumstances, but identifying with one's goals and convictions remains desirable.

The notion of authenticity, then, refers to the positive unity of a person and her different projects and roles.⁹ It seems plausible to me to use the notion of authenticity in this context – at least when it is properly understood as the opposite of alienation, without being overly charged and existentialised. Self-determination is emphatically not to be understood, as someone like Charles Taylor does, as a rival for the idea of one's own self, which is to be discovered – such an opposition between autonomy and authenticity strikes me as a normative misconception.¹⁰ It is a misconception because the opposition emerges only when

⁸ 'It is a mark of the human that we do not quite fit into our own skins. That is, we do not fit without remainder into socially available practical identities', Jonathan Lear, cited in Moran, 'Psychoanalysis and the Limits of Reflection': 104 – this is why the metaphor of clothing is such an illuminative and much-used one. Also see Anne Enright, *The Green Road*: 'It was as though she was wearing someone else's coat, one that was the same as hers – the exact same, down to the make and size – but it wasn't her coat, she could tell it wasn't. It just looked the same.'

⁹ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*: 102ff. On Taylor, cf. Rosa, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis*: 195–212. Rosa elaborates on the distinctions between authenticity, autonomy and alienation.

¹⁰ This misunderstanding can also be found in, for instance, Ferrara *Reflective Authenticity*: 1–21 and 127–147; or Menke, *Tragödie im Sittlichen*: 192–204. Cf. Varga, *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*, which stands in the tradition of the opposition of autonomy and authenticity; in other respects, Varga too thinks that any theory of the good life only allows for the articulation of formal conditions, cf., for instance, p. 3: 'the question concerning the formal conditions of the "good life" can be answered in two ways: in the vocabulary of autonomy or in the vocabulary of authenticity'. Also cf. 61–85 on the different models of authenticity. A similarly down-to-earth notion of authenticity as mine is argued for by, amongst others, Feinberg, 'Autonomy': 32: 'A person is authentic to the extent that [...] he can and does subject his opinions and tastes to rational

autonomy is understood purely as a moral (Kantian) instead of a personal notion, and when, consequently, one's conception of autonomy is overly narrow. In that case, it means that one contrasts the vocabulary of autonomy with that of authenticity and understands the ideal of authenticity – as in the famous advice of Polonius: This above all: to thine own self be true – as something that competes with the ideal of autonomy.¹¹

If one conceives of autonomy in a broader sense, then authenticity can be an expression of the autonomous person and thus serve, conceptually, as the opposite of alienation. In that case, the autonomous life can be the very same as the authentic life – and it can remain autonomous even if it is not always fully authentic, if, for example, instances of alienation cause a person to no longer be able to identify with certain aspects of her life. If authenticity is linked to autonomy, this also means that we are able to ask in a very fundamental sense about the authenticity of our own desires – for in that case authenticity is just as relevant to my own will and to the question how I want to live as the question regarding autonomy. In a way, this is a rather down-to earth conception of authenticity that does not necessarily imply that there is such a thing as an authentic self that we ought to help bring about or that we could fail to attain. In other words, the only purpose of the notion for me is to show that what matters in our striving for the good, well-lived, autonomous life is that we want our own lives, with relationships and projects from which we do not (or as little as possible) feel alienated, and which we can endorse as our own even if they contain ambivalences and uncertainties.

In order to be autonomous, we need to identify with our decisions and our projects and try to live in a way that is as non-alienated as possible. And we need to stand behind our projects, be loyal to them and not give up on them prematurely. Let me now turn to the question what such loyalty might mean, in order to complete the arc of the question regarding the good life.

scrutiny. He is authentic to the extent that he can and does alter his convictions for reasons of his own, and does this without guilt or anxiety.'

¹¹ The original source of this counsel is Shakespeare's Hamlet, Act I, scene iii.