

Self-realisation and usefulness: a critical examination of self-determination theory

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Abstract

Individual autonomy (or self-determination) is increasingly treated by economists as a dimension of value, complementary with welfare, efficiency and distributional equality. Many contributors to this literature acknowledge Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory as providing psychological foundations for the concepts of intrinsic motivation and autonomy. In a critical examination of that theory, I argue that its intrinsic/extrinsic categorisation of motivations and its emphasis on self-realisation do not properly recognise the ways in which individuals can find satisfaction in being useful to one another. If market transactions are viewed through the lens of self-determination theory, their moral content can be obscured.

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There is an growing tendency for economists to treat individual *autonomy* (or *self-determination*) as a dimension of value, complementary with the more familiar values of welfare, efficiency and distributional equality. The idea that autonomy has value is often presented as a challenge to neoclassical welfare economics and, in particular, to neoclassical economists' commendations of competitive markets.

One strand in the literature of autonomy is concerned with the related concept of intrinsic motivation. Acting on one's intrinsic motivations is often construed as an expression of autonomy. Virtue ethicists have argued that some goods have an intrinsic value that is not reducible to the willingness of consumers to pay for them. The producers of such goods—for example, teachers, nurses, athletes and artists—can be motivated by the intrinsic value of their work, but (it is claimed) that motivation is liable to be undermined by direct monetary incentives (Anderson, 1993; Sandel, 2012). Economists have analysed this and similar mechanisms by which intrinsic motivations can be crowded out by material incentives (Frey, 1994; Katz and Handy, 1998; Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000; Heyes, 2005). Some experiments have found that implicit valuations of morality and social responsibility are lower when participants interact in bilateral bargaining or market exchange than when they make decisions as individuals. These findings have been interpreted as evidence that markets can corrode moral motivations (Falk and Szech, 2013; Bartling et al., 2015). Referring to this body of evidence, Shaun Hargreaves Heap (2021: 46–47) suggests that market incentives may crowd out norms of mutual respect that are based on 'shared views of what matters'.

A second strand can be found in the literature of behavioural public policy. This literature starts from a recognition that individuals' decisions often fail to reveal the stable and context-independent preferences that are represented in neoclassical economic models, and considers how public policy should respond to that observation. These deviations from economic theory are often characterised as psychologically-induced 'errors' and 'biases'; public policies are then proposed with the objective of countering these effects. Some writers argue that the psychological mechanisms that induce these effects are, by that very fact, diminutions of the autonomy of the individuals who are subject to them. For example, Daniel Hausman and Bryn Welch (2010: 126) describe these mechanisms as 'interfer[ing] with rational deliberation'; Julian Le Grand and Bill New (2015: 119) describe them as inducing failures of reasoning that constitute 'a limited loss of autonomy'. When profit-seeking firms use business practices that rely on consumers' susceptibility to these effects, regulations against those practices have been justified as supporting consumers' autonomy. Thus, for example, Adam Oliver (2023: xi, 8, 134–148) argues for such regulations (or 'budges') while espousing an approach to behavioural public policy that he characterises as autonomy-enhancing and anti-paternalistic.

A third strand of literature recognises the descriptive limitations of neoclassical models, but does not treat these as evidence of individuals' errors or biases. Rather than proposing public policies to counter supposed errors, it advocates an *agentic* approach to normative economics in which individual agency is a central value. I have a special interest in this approach because it has been presented as an alternative to my own attempts to develop a form of normative analysis that is rooted in the liberal tradition of economics but compatible with the findings of behavioural economics. The normative economics I propose does not claim to judge whether individuals' preferences are erroneous or biased, but instead attaches value to individuals' opportunities to engage in voluntary transactions. Competitive markets can be shown to be effective in providing such opportunities, whether or not individuals' preferences are stable or context-independent (Sugden, 2004, 2018a; McQuillin and Sugden, 2012). Hargreaves Heap is one of a number of thoughtful commentators who have argued that, in not taking account of the processes by which individuals' preferences are formed, my approach neglects the moral value of autonomy and self-determination (Schubert, 2015; Dold and Schubert, 2018; Hargreaves Heap, 2021; Dold and Lewis, 2023).

In the current paper, I take a step back and consider the constructs of intrinsic motivation, autonomy and self-determination that are invoked in these literatures. In each of the strands, it is common for writers to acknowledge the *self-determination theory* of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan as providing psychological foundations for those constructs. My paper is a close examination of that theory. I will argue that Deci and Ryan's intrinsic/extrinsic categorisation does not properly recognise the ways in which, without any grander thoughts about self-realisation, individuals can find satisfaction in being useful to one another. If market transactions are viewed through the lens of self-determination theory, their moral content can be obscured.

1. Self-determination theory

In commenting on self-determination theory (SDT), I treat as canonical three immensely highly-cited papers published by Deci and Ryan in 2000: Deci and Ryan (2000), Ryan and Deci (2000a) and Ryan and Deci (2000b).¹ From here on, I will refer to these papers as DR, RDa and RDb respectively.

I begin with a fundamental property of SDT: it is a theory of perceptions of self-determination and not of self-determination itself. Any account of self-determination has to come to terms with two of the classic problems of philosophy—the mind–body problem and the problem of free will versus determinism. These problems arise because human beings perceive themselves as being capable of choosing between alternative actions, but that

¹ As of November 2023, these three papers have a combined Google Scholar citation count of over 132,000.

apparent capacity is difficult to describe, explain or test in ways that empirical science recognises. However, that human beings have *perceptions of self-determination* is an uncontroversial fact of psychology; explaining those perceptions is a well-defined research problem for empirical science. This restriction of the scope of SDT might seem to be a limitation: as Ryan and Deci (2006: 1574–1575) later acknowledge in response to some criticisms of their theory, people can have perceptions of agency when their actual control over events, as judged by current science, is illusory—as when they use Ouija boards or divining rods. Nevertheless, clarity is served by treating self-determination as a psychological construct, bracketing out questions about the truth or falsity of people’s perceptions about their own psychology.

SDT has its origins in the *self-perception theory* of Daryl Bem (1967). This theory proposes that, in the absence of strong emotional cues, individuals are liable to construct their attitudes by observing their own behaviour and inferring the attitudes that would have been most likely to cause it. One implication of this theory is that if an individual is paid for performing an intrinsically interesting task, their subsequent rating of how interesting that task was, and hence their intrinsic motivation for performing it in future, may be reduced. Deci (1971) tested this hypothesis in a *free choice* design. The essential principle of such a design is that a person’s intrinsic motivation for performing a task is measured by their propensity to perform it when there is no external incentive to do so and when other presumably pleasurable, non-incentivised activities are available as alternatives. In Deci’s experiment, the subjects were college students, the target activity was solving abstract but intrinsically interesting puzzles, and the alternatives were reading popular magazines. Each subject took part in three sessions on separate days. The only difference between sessions was that, for some but not all subjects in the second session, there was a monetary incentive for solving the puzzles. The key finding was that in the third session, subjects who had previously been incentivised spent less time working on the puzzles than the others did.

SDT incorporates this finding into a grand vision of what it is to be human:

The starting point for SDT is the postulate that humans are active, growth-oriented organisms who are naturally inclined toward integration of their psychic elements into a unified sense of self and integration of themselves into larger social structures. In other words, SDT suggests that it is part of the adaptive design of the human organism to engage interesting activities, to exercise capacities, to pursue connectedness in social groups, and to integrate intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences into a relative unity. (DR: 229)

From birth onward, humans, in their healthiest states, are active, inquisitive, curious, and playful creatures, displaying a ubiquitous readiness to learn and explore, and they do not require extraneous incentives to do so. (RDb: 56)

In some respects, these ideas are liberal and humanistic, with echoes of John Stuart Mill's account of the value of individuality.² But Deci and Ryan develop their vision in ways that do not fit easily with a liberal conception of a free society as a network of cooperation.

The free choice experimental paradigm is fundamental to SDT. *Intrinsic motivation* is defined as a form of motivation that is directed at an activity *in itself*, independently of any consequences that are separable from that activity. Thus:

Intrinsically motivated behaviors are those that are freely engaged out of interest without the necessity of separable consequences. (DR: 233)

[I]ntrinsic motivation involves people freely engaging in activities that they find interesting, that provide novelty and optimal challenge. (DR: 235)

When intrinsically motivated a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external prods, pressures, or rewards. (RDb: 56)

As the definition of a construct, this is unexceptionable. But Deci and Ryan treat this construct as the *prototype* of self-determination:

[Intrinsic motivation] is the prototype of self-determined activity and as such represents a standard against which the qualities of an extrinsically motivated behavior can be compared to determine its degree of self-determination. (DC: 237; see also RDa: 69 and RDb: 62)

By definition, intrinsically motivated behaviors, the prototype of self-determined actions, stem from the self. They are unalienated and authentic in the fullest sense of those terms. (RDa: 74)

This crucial step in the theory declares that an activity is self-determined to the degree that it resembles activities that are performed purely for interest, fun or challenge. Recall that self-determination has been presented as a (perhaps the) fundamental aspiration of humanity. In a later paper, Ryan and Deci (2006: 1566) describe intrinsic motivation as 'a form of optimal experience'. They are telling us that the ideal form of human life—the form of life that is most authentically human—is *play*.

That real human life cannot be all play is presented as a matter for regret, expressed as the lost innocence of early childhood:

² As in: 'It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it. Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself. ... Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing' (Mill, 1859/1972: 117). Mill's conception of a liberal society as a 'community of advantage' has been one of my inspirations, but I am more hesitant about going along with his account of the moral importance of striving for self-perfection (Sugden, 2018: 1–4).

[M]uch of what people do is not, strictly speaking, intrinsically motivated, especially after early childhood when the freedom to be intrinsically motivated is increasingly curtailed by social pressures to do activities that are not interesting and to assume a variety of new responsibilities. (RDa: 71; see also RDb: 60)

For Deci and Ryan, this thought prompts the question that SDT is intended to answer:

The real question concerning nonintrinsically motivated practices is how individuals acquire the motivation to carry them out and how this motivation affects ongoing persistence, behavioral quality, and well-being. (RDa 71)

In other words: if humans are naturally oriented towards play, psychology needs to explain how merely useful activities that do *not* offer interest, fun or challenge ever get performed. And this leads to the less liberal thought that what is needed is *regulation*.

Significantly, Deci and Ryan often treat motivation as an activity by which some people—the implicit addressees of SDT—regulate others. For example:

Motivation produces. It is therefore of preeminent concern to those in roles such as manager, teacher, religious leader, coach, health care provider, and parent that involve mobilizing others to act. (RDa: 69)

And (addressing teachers):

Frankly speaking, because many of the tasks that educators want their students to perform are not inherently interesting or enjoyable, knowing how to promote more active and volitional (versus passive and controlling) forms of extrinsic motivation becomes an essential strategy for successful teaching. (RDb: 55–56)

The best to be hoped for is that, perhaps under the guidance of sympathetic motivators, individuals willingly impose the necessary regulations on themselves.

In SDT, all motivations are classified as either intrinsic or extrinsic.³ *Extrinsic motivation* is ‘the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome’ (RDa: 71). SDT proposes a taxonomy of four types of extrinsic motivation—or, equivalently, of forms of self-regulation—that differ in the degree to which regulations are perceived as self-chosen.

The least self-determined type of motivation is *external regulation*: ‘[p]eople behave to attain a desired consequence such as tangible rewards or to avoid a threatened punishment’.⁴ Motivations that are more self-determined than this involve some degree of *internalisation*. Internalisation is ‘an active, natural process in which individuals attempt to transform socially sanctioned mores or requests into personally endorsed values and self-

³ SDT also has a category of *amotivation*—‘a state in which people lack the intention to behave’ (DR: 237).

⁴ Quotations in this and the following paragraph are from DR: 236–239.

regulations'. Notice the suggestion that all forms of internalisation involve submission to forces which, prior to 'transformation', are in opposition to the individual's authentic desires.

The least self-determined form of internalisation is *introjection*. In this case, the individual is still responding to 'prods and pressures'—potential punishments and rewards—but the punishments (e.g., sensations of shame or guilt) and rewards (e.g., sensations of pride or self-worth) are self-administered. There is still 'inner conflict between the demand of the introject and the person's lack of desire to carry it out'. The second stage of internalisation is *identification*: 'the process through which people recognize and accept the underlying value of a behavior'. The behaviour is still instrumental—it is directed at some separable goal—but the individual has endorsed that goal as her own. The final stage of internalisation is *integration*:

This is the fullest, most complete form of internalization of extrinsic motivation, for it not only involves identifying with the importance of behaviors but also integrating those identifications with other aspects of the self. When regulations are integrated people will have fully accepted them by bringing them into harmony or coherence with other aspects of their values and identity.

Integration is an 'active, constructive process of giving personal meaning and valence to acquired regulations'. But for Deci and Ryan, something of the ideal of self-determination is lacking even when regulation is fully integrated: 'even though fully volitional, [the motivation] is instrumental'. The distinction between identification and integration is not entirely clear, but the concept of integration is obviously intended to represent Deci and Ryan's ideal of a unified sense of self.

This taxonomy fits well with problems faced by many of Deci and Ryan's addressees—people whose job is to motivate others. Expanding on an example used by Deci and Ryan (RDa: 71), consider how a teacher might try to motivate a teenage student to do his maths homework. For a student who finds maths boring or tiresome, the motivation might be a tariff of punishments and rewards (external regulation). It might be a sense of duty inculcated by parents or teachers (introjected regulation). Or it might be the student's recognition that proficiency in school-level maths is a necessary condition for entry to a career that he has a personal ambition to follow (identification or integration, perhaps depending on his beliefs about the actual importance of mathematical skills in the practice of that career). A different student might simply enjoy the challenge of mathematical exercises, or be curious about the properties of numbers (intrinsic motivation). But one may ask how much of human life can be modelled by this kind of motivational problem.

2. Innate psychological needs

In parallel with its taxonomy of motivations, SDT proposes a theory of *innate* (or *basic*) *psychological needs*. The needs that are relevant for SDT are those ‘that give goals their psychological potency and that influence which regulatory processes direct people’s goal pursuits’. SDT identifies three such needs—for *competence*, *relatedness* and *autonomy*—as ‘essential for understanding the what (i.e., content) and why (i.e., process) of goal pursuits’. Competence, relatedness and autonomy are described as ‘innate psychological nutriments that are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being’. Just as dietary nutriments are essential for physical health and are sought out by physically healthy individuals, the three psychological nutriments are essential for psychological health and are sought out by psychologically healthy individuals:

[T]he natural processes such as intrinsic motivation, integration of extrinsic regulations, and movement toward well-being are theorized to operate optimally only to the extent that the nutriments are immediately present, or, alternatively, to the extent that the individual has sufficient inner resources to find or construct the necessary nourishment. (DR: 228–229).

If the analogy with diet is to be taken seriously, psychological nutriments must be distinguished from psychological health. Health is a state that nutriments tend to maintain and which may be a precondition for individuals to be effective in seeking out the nutriments that their health requires. I take SDT to be treating the degrees to which regulations are internalised as psychological *states*, and competence, relatedness and autonomy as *causes* of those states.

This interpretation fits with Deci and Ryan’s definition of competence as ‘a propensity to have an effect on the environment as well as to attain valued outcomes within it’ (DR: 231). In the homework example, the competence of the student is his perception of his ability to find correct solutions to the mathematical problems he has been set. It is reasonable to hypothesise, as SDT does, that a perception of competence will make it easier for the student to internalise the regulation that requires him to do his homework. Similarly, Deci and Ryan describe relatedness as referring to ‘the desire to feel connected to others – to love and care, and to be loved and cared for’. Relatedness features in SDT because of the hypothesis that intrinsic motivation will be more likely to be maintained in ‘contexts characterized by a sense of secure relatedness’. Thus, students show more intrinsic motivation if their teachers are experienced as ‘warm and caring’ (DR: 231).

When Deci and Ryan cite evidence that autonomy is ‘essential to intrinsic motivation’, they use the same distinction between psychological states and their causes. The evidence they cite is about how the context in which an activity takes place affects the intrinsic motivation of the actor. Negative effects have been found for threats, surveillance, evaluations, competition and deadlines. Positive effects have been found for opportunities

for choice (DR: 234). In this use of the concept, ‘autonomy’ has its primary etymological meaning of *self-governance*, understood in a literal sense: the student’s autonomy with respect to his homework depends on the extent of his freedom to choose what to do and when to do it, rather than being subject to the directions of teachers and parents.

However, Deci and Ryan also use ‘autonomy’ more metaphorically, as a synonym for ‘self-determination’. When presenting their taxonomy of types of extrinsic motivation, they sometimes describe the more self-determined forms as more autonomous (e.g., DR: 236, 237; RDa: 71; RDb: 62, 64). Sometimes their definitions of autonomy seem indistinguishable from their definitions of self-determination, as in:

Autonomy refers to volition – the organismic desire to self-organize experience and behavior and to have activity be concordant with one’s integrated sense of self. (DR: 231)

[A]utonomy concerns the experience of integration and freedom, and it is an essential aspect of healthy human functioning. (DR: 231)

Autonomy involves being volitional, acting from one’s integrated sense of self, and endorsing one’s actions. (DR: 242)

This ambivalence between autonomy as cause and autonomy as effect is a potential source of confusion. When writing in my own voice, I will use the term ‘self-governance’ for what I have called the literal sense of ‘autonomy’, and ‘self-determination’ for autonomy in Deci and Ryan’s broader sense.

3. Usefulness

Every evening after the main meal of the day, my wife and I wash the dishes. What is my motivation for participating in this activity?

In Deci and Ryan’s sense, I am not intrinsically motivated. My behaviour has a ‘separable’ goal, namely that the dishes become clean and dry. If the dishes were already clean, I would have no desire to dirty them and then re-wash them for pure enjoyment. But—and this is part of the explanation of why our kitchen does not have a dishwasher—I do not experience the initial dirtiness of the dishes as ‘prods’ or ‘pressures’ to act contrary to my inclinations. Nor do I feel prodded or pressured by my knowledge that my wife is expecting me to join with her in washing up, or by the thought that failing to wash up would lead to feelings of shame or guilt. (In fact it would, but that is not something I need to think about.) I do not feel any need for self-regulation.

If I were participating in a ‘day reconstruction’ survey and were asked to recall my feelings while washing up, I would report them as mildly pleasurable.⁵ In the light of Deci and Ryan’s theory of innate psychological needs, that pleasure should not be surprising. I have competence in washing up. That activity is not particularly varied or challenging, but it is not exactly the same from day to day and involves a certain amount of skill and discretion. When I perform the activity successfully—through my agency, a previously dirty dish becomes clean and dry—I get immediate visual feedback. The activity involves relatedness in the form of cooperative interaction with another person, and thereby tends to induce a pleasurable correspondence of sentiments.⁶ In washing up, my wife and I are self-governing. Cooperating as equals, we are not subject to threats, surveillance, evaluations, competitions or deadlines imposed by anyone else. In all these respects, my participating in washing up satisfies innate psychological needs.

Does it count against this conclusion that the activity is repeated every day with only minor variations? Compare the behaviour of eating breakfast.⁷ Every morning, I feel the same basic need for nutrition. Every morning I eat the same breakfast with only minor variations. Every morning the experience is pleasurable. This regular pattern has a simple explanation: every morning I am hungry, and eating satisfies that need.

An advocate of SDT might interpret my motivation for washing up is an example of integration. My participation in washing up is a small part of a long-lasting marriage partnership, and my role in that partnership is undoubtedly integrated into my sense of self. So perhaps my motivation to wash up derives from a more general motivation which, at a deep level of selfhood, I endorse. But here is another example.

Perhaps as a result of my age, I often find it difficult to set up the new software packages that my employers expect me to use. Fortunately, I have helpful workmates. Consider a case in which a workmate, noticing my difficulties, volunteers to help me set up some software. What is his motivation for doing this?

Setting up (what for him are) simple software packages is not something he would do for interest, fun or challenge. As viewed by SDT, the activity has a separable goal—my becoming able to use the package. For the workmate, there are no material rewards for achieving this goal and no punishments for not doing so. A sense of pride in being helpful

⁵ The day reconstruction method of eliciting people’s experiences of everyday life is described by Kahneman et al. (2004).

⁶ That correspondences of sentiments are pleasurable, even if the original sentiments are painful, is a fundamental principle of Adam Smith’s (1759/1976: 13–16) theory of moral sentiments. For more on this, see Sugden (2002).

⁷ The psychological significance of breakfast was pointed out to me by Daniel Kahneman in a discussion of the findings of the day reconstruction method. I cannot recall the exact occasion.

and a belief that not helping would induce guilt might play some part in his motivation, but neither of those factors seems essential to his behaviour. An advocate of SDT might suggest that the workmate sees his action as pursuing the goals of the institution for which we work, and has identified with those goals. But, in my experience of workplace helping in large institutions, institutional goals are too remote to motivate day-to-day interactions. More plausibly, the advocate might suggest that the workmate's sense of self includes a perception of himself as a helpful person. But to view everyday helping as a form of self-realisation, of being true to oneself, seems to miss the point of helping. As viewed by the workmate, helping is not about him, it is about my need for help.

Nevertheless, the workmate's activity in setting up the software can satisfy the three psychological needs of SDT. He has competence in the task, and his perception of this is reinforced by my lack of it. He gets immediate feedback from success in getting the software to work. As a voluntary helper, his role in the activity is essentially one of self-governance. Even when a helper and a helpee are strangers to one another, their interaction can induce a temporary sense of connectedness and correspondence of sentiments. Thus, SDT can explain what I take to be a fact of general experience—that such low-cost forms of helping are often perceived by the helper as mildly pleasurable.

I believe that these examples reveal a limitation of SDT's intrinsic/extrinsic categorisation of motivations. That categorisation fails to recognise that activities can have *intrinsic purposes*. By the 'intrinsic purpose' of an activity, I simply mean the most natural or socially recognised answer to the question 'What is the purpose of this activity?' Crucially, this is not the same as asking someone what goal of theirs they are trying to achieve by participating in an activity. That the dishes become clean and dry is not (or not just) a separable consequence of the activity of washing up; it is the purpose of the activity. That I become able to use the software is not a separable consequence of the workmate's activity of helping; it is the purpose of the activity. If we try to separate the consequence from the activity—for example, by imagining a case in which clean dishes are artificially dirtied so that they can be re-washed—we fundamentally change the nature of the activity.

For some activities, of course, the intrinsic purpose *is* interest, fun or challenge. The puzzle-solving activities for which Deci (1971) elicited students' intrinsic motivations are examples: most people would recognise those puzzles as having the purposes of interest and challenge, even if personally they would not enjoy trying to solve them. But for many activities of everyday life—including washing up and helping other people set up their software—the purpose is some form of *usefulness*. When participating in such an activity, it is possible (though not a matter of necessity) that a person takes on its purpose—its usefulness—as his motivation. This is not self-regulation. It is better understood as a form of

intrinsic motivation that does not fit SDT's definition of the concept. I will call it *purpose-conditional motivation*.

The 'purpose-conditional' qualifier marks an important difference between this kind of motivation and SDT's concept of integrated extrinsic motivation. For Deci and Ryan, integration is a matter of self-realisation, of 'giving personal meaning and valence to acquired regulations', of harmonising them with a unified sense of self. It is contrasted with 'compartmentalized' identification, which I take to mean identification that is context-dependent (DR: 238). But purpose-conditional motivation is inherently context-dependent. It involves taking on a purpose that is given by the context in which you find yourself. Social life involves cooperating with many different people in activities with many different purposes. That necessarily requires compromises between what you want to achieve and what others want to achieve. That human beings have innate psychological needs for competence, relatedness and self-governance is entirely credible. But the idea of an innate psychological desire to unify the disparate purposes of human life into a single sense of self strikes me as implausible—not to say narcissistic.

4. The dignity of work

For Deci and Ryan, the most authentic form of human life—the activity to which humans are most naturally oriented—is play. But many thinkers have found at least as much authenticity in *work*. My spokesperson for this perspective on human life is the Italian author Primo Levi.

A chemist by training, Levi survived his deportation to Auschwitz as a young Jewish man by being assigned as a slave assistant to a chemical laboratory working on synthetic rubber production. After the war and up to his retirement age, he combined writing with working as a chemist. One of his most engaging books, *The Periodic Table*, uses the elements of the periodic table as an organising device for reflecting on episodes in his life. The Penguin edition of this book includes an essay by the American author Philip Roth, recollecting a meeting between the two men (Levi, 2000: vii–xix).

In the meeting, Roth suggests that the distinctive features of Levi's writing reflect his professional character as a scientist—as a 'controller of experiments who seeks the principle of order'. Levi disagrees, saying that he has never been a scientist. As a young man, he *wanted* to become a scientist, but the war and Auschwitz prevented that. (The intensity of that unrealised desire is painfully clear in his recollections.) In his professional life, Levi says, he was a chemical technician and later a manager in a paint factory who had many responsibilities that were 'far from chemistry'. Nevertheless:

I have no regrets. I don't believe I have wasted my time in managing a factory. My factory *militanza*—my compulsory and honourable service there—kept me in touch with the world of real things.

For Levi, it seems, ‘real’ work—work with immediately obvious usefulness—has a dignity that even critically applauded creative writing does not quite match.

Explaining this attitude to the life of work, Levi says

I am persuaded that normal human beings are biologically built for an activity that is aimed toward a goal and that idleness, or aimless work (like Auschwitz’s *Arbeit*⁸), gives rise to suffering and to atrophy.

He recalls Lorenzo Perrone, a non-Jewish Italian bricklayer who was transferred to Auschwitz as one of a group of effectively forced labourers, and who befriended Levi there:

At Auschwitz, I quite often observed a curious phenomenon. The need for *lavoro ben fatto*—‘work properly done’—is so strong as to induce people to perform even slavish chores ‘properly’. The Italian bricklayer who saved my life by bringing me food on the sly for six months hated Germans, their food, their language, their war; but when they set him to erect walls, he built them straight and solid, not out of obedience but out of professional dignity.

Even for a forced labourer in a concentration camp, the purpose of bricklaying is to build walls that stand up. It seems that, while working, Perrone took on that purpose. It is not absurd to suppose that, given the deprivation of his situation, Perrone derived psychological nutriment from bricklaying. He and his fellow bricklayers had a competence that their guards lacked and were compelled to recognise. For a team of workers to exercise that competence would presumably involve some degree of self-governance that would contrast with many other features of camp life. It would also have involved cooperation between individuals who were related to one another by nationality and by shared experiences of what amounted to deportation. All this is in accord with SDT’s theory of innate psychological needs. Crucially, however, Perrone took on the intrinsic purpose of bricklaying without any sense of identification with the extrinsic value of the consequences of his work.

Levi’s example of Perrone’s bricklaying is at the opposite end of a spectrum of seriousness to my examples of washing up and helping workmates to set up software, but all three examples are consistent with the hypothesis that human beings are naturally oriented to purposeful work. As less anecdotal evidence, consider the games that young children play at an age when, according to Deci and Ryan, they are not constrained by social pressures. Think how many of these games involve pretending to engage in what, in adult life, would be purposeful work—for example, as an engineer, a nurse, a firefighter, a caterer, a soldier, or a mother caring for a baby. This form of play involves imagination, creativity and experiment,

⁸ A reference to the cruelly false motto *Arbeit Macht Frei* displayed above the gateway to Auschwitz.

but it is directed at learning about different forms of work. I conclude that purposeful work has its own authenticity.

5. Markets and morals

As I said in the introduction, my main concern is with how Deci and Ryan's analysis of autonomy and self-determination has been used in economics—by economists themselves, and by (often critical) commentators on what economists do. Much of this literature starts from the finding that individuals' intrinsic motivations, as those are defined by SDT, can be undermined by extrinsic rewards. Although Deci and Ryan's main emphasis is on activities that are intrinsically interesting, challenging or enjoyable, the 'markets and morals' literature has applied the concept of intrinsic motivation to other-regarding attitudes, such as the commitment of a teacher to her students' education or of a nurse to his patients' health. The implication that has been drawn from SDT is that such motivations are weakened if the relationship between work and pay is too explicit. Some writers go further, and argue that employers can select intrinsically motivated workers by paying wages that self-interested workers would reject.⁹

Taken to their logical limits, these applications of SDT invoke a picture of an economy in which everyone is free to choose how to use their labour without any consequences for how it is rewarded, but everyone still receives the benefits of an efficient allocation of resources. Such a picture is drawn vividly but unconvincingly by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1845):

...in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.¹⁰

The essential idea is that everyone works according to his or her intrinsic motivation, but somehow, everyone's needs are satisfied. No one intends to be useful to other people; usefulness just happens. ('General production' is 'regulated', but the regulations somehow allow everyone to spend his time however he likes.) Viewed in the perspective of SDT, this is a Utopia of authenticity. However, Deci and Ryan have no illusions about its feasibility. Their less welcome conclusion is that economic reality compels us to compromise our

⁹ For references, see the second paragraph of the introduction.

¹⁰ This passage appears in Part IA of *The German Ideology*, in the subsection 'Private property and communism'.

authenticity by subjecting ourselves to regulation. The ‘markets and morals’ literature recasts this as the claim that a justification of the market system requires moral compromises.

In work with various co-authors, I have argued that a well-functioning market is governed by a morality that the ‘markets and morals’ literature does not recognise—a morality of voluntary cooperation for mutual benefit. Participants in market transactions act morally by acting on the intention *to be useful to one another* (Bruni and Sugden, 2013; Sugden, 2018a; Isoni et al., 2023; Sugden, 2022; Lyons and Sugden, 2023). In the current paper, I have tried to show that this intention can properly be understood as a distinctive form of intrinsic motivation.

6. The inner rational agent and the unified self

A recurring finding of behavioural economics is that individuals’ choices from given sets of options are systematically *context-dependent*: which option a person chooses depends on properties of ‘context’ or ‘framing’ that have no relevance for that person’s welfare or interests. Nevertheless, these effects are predictable and can be explained as the results of mechanisms of human psychology. One of my favourite examples is that people’s choices between alternative snacks to be delivered at a stated time on a stated future day depend on the time of day *at which the choice is made*: hunger-satisfying snacks are more likely to be chosen at times of day when people are hungrier (Read and van Leeuwen, 1998).

Behavioural economists routinely describe such effects as revealing errors and biases in human reasoning, and propose policy interventions that are intended to steer people away from these mistakes. For example, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2008: 5, italics in original) interpret the findings of behavioural economics as showing that individuals often make ‘pretty bad decisions—decisions that they would not have made if they had paid full attention and possessed complete information, unlimited cognitive abilities, and complete self-control’. They present their ‘nudge’ proposals as attempts to make choosers ‘better off, *as judged by themselves*’.

This approach to normative behavioural economics—the approach of *behavioural welfare economics*—makes sense only on the assumption that individuals have context-independent *latent* (or ‘true’) preferences that are not reliably revealed in choices but which behavioural science can access. Its implicit model of a human decision maker is a disembodied *inner rational agent* whose interactions with the outside world are processed by error-prone psychological mechanisms. With co-authors, I have argued that this model has no foundations in empirical psychology (Infante et al., 2016).

In this section, I consider a strand of literature that proposes a different form of normative behavioural economics—the *agentic* approach that I mentioned in the introduction. This approach is based on ideas that have a strong affinity with Deci and Ryan’s self-

determination theory, but it is more directly concerned with issues of normative economics and public policy. I will focus on six contributions to this literature—papers by Hargreaves Heap (2013, 2017, 2023), Christian Schubert (2015), Malte Dold and Alexa Stanton (2021), and Dold and Paul Lewis (2023). First, however, I consider Deci and Ryan’s own analysis of a topic that is often discussed by behavioural economists—persuasive but non-informative advertising.

Deci and Ryan use a concept of *implicit motivation*. A car driver who automatically changes gear in response to changes in engine noise acts on an implicit motivation, but for Deci and Ryan this counts as an autonomous action if, ‘were she to consider it reflectively, she would wholly endorse the action’. They contrast this case with persuasive advertising:

Despite a personal commitment to saving money for retirement, a man implicitly primed by an advertisement finds himself mindlessly buying a useless product. This would be a controlled action, and were he to consider it reflectively, he would agree that the behavior was inconsistent with his own values. [...] Some habits and reactions are ones we would experience as autonomous; others seem alien, imposed, or unwanted. (Ryan and Deci, 2006: 1573)

This analysis has striking parallels with Sunstein and Thaler’s use of the inner rational agent model.¹¹ Where a behavioural welfare economist would appeal to the man’s latent preferences, Deci and Ryan appeal to his reflective self.

Notice how Deci and Ryan are treating the effects of an ‘implicit prime’ on a person’s behaviour as alien to his true self unless, when (or perhaps if) thinking reflectively, he endorses (or would endorse) the behaviour it induces. In a realistic telling of the story of the useless product, the man is aware of the prime itself (for example, he sees that the advert shows an attractive woman apparently enjoying the product) and he has the perception of making a choice. What he is unaware of is the workings of the psychological process by which the prime affects his desire to buy the product. His experience of buying is not that of ‘finding himself’ doing something in the sense that a person might find himself tripping over an unnoticed obstacle or changing gears when driving a car. It is a conscious choice made in a particular context of which he is fully aware. In other contexts (for example, if the advert had featured a less attractive user of the product), the man might have made a different but equally conscious choice.

Economists are trained to think of such context-dependent preferences as contrary to principles of rationality, and thus as evidence of failures of reasoning—of biases and errors. Viewed in the perspective of SDT, they are contrary to the ideal of an integrated sense of self.

¹¹ Compare Thaler’s (2018) discussion of marketing nudges which ‘encourage buyers in order to maximize profits rather than to improve the buyers’ welfare’—an example of what he categorises as ‘sludge’.

Unless the inconsistency can be classified as the result of external ‘imposition’ or ‘control’ (and therefore of a constraint on self-governance), it is treated as evidence of a lack of authenticity. But this is a conception of authenticity that treats the ordinary workings of human psychology as inauthentic. Implicit primes exist everywhere in human life. In our interactions with other people, we are all influenced by implicit primes and we all use them in ways that influence those others. Deci and Ryan’s account of authenticity is one of alienation from oneself as a psychological being.

Despite the parallels between the inner rational agent of behavioural welfare economics and the unified self of SDT, there is a key difference—the emphasis that SDT gives to self-creation. In behavioural welfare economics, latent preferences are usually treated as given, just as revealed preferences are usually treated as given in neoclassical economics. Usually, no explanation is offered for the implicit assumption that latent preferences satisfy the consistency axioms of neoclassical theory. The background thought is presumably that those axioms are principles of rationality and that, in some sense, human beings want to be rational or benefit from being rational; but the process by which they *become* rational is not explained. In contrast, recall that the unified self of SDT is theorised as the result of a process in which human beings—understood as ‘active, growth-oriented organisms who are naturally inclined toward integration of their psychic elements into a unified sense of self’—internalise regulations.

The agentic approach has the same emphasis on self-creation. Its normative ideal is a society in which each individual engages in a lifelong project of creating, revising and improving their own preferences. Its distinctive recommendation is that public policy should be designed to support this process. For example, Hargreaves Heap (2017: 255) urges the importance of ‘owning’ one’s own preferences:

To own our preferences is to have an identity and to own them requires that we know why we have them. Such knowing is a life project and liberty makes available the practices of thinking and acting through which we develop the ability to discern and desire what is best.

Some proponents of the agentic approach refer explicitly to SDT as showing that a sense of agency contributes to psychological health (Dold and Lewis, 2023: 4; Dold and Stanton, 2021: 4). Exactly how public policy should support the self-creation of preferences is not set out in concrete terms in any of the five papers, but four general themes emerge.

Opportunity to learn new preferences. Individuals’ opportunity sets should offer a rich variety of alternatives, so that individuals are able to experiment with different ways of living and learn new preferences. This idea is particularly emphasised by Schubert (2015: 287):

We suggest the criterion of ‘opportunity to learn’ as the proper yardstick to judge real-world institutional arrangements. When assessing them, we should ask: ‘Do they allow individuals to try out and learn new preferences?’ rather than ‘Do they allow individuals to satisfy whatever preferences they happen to have?’

I am not sure how this passage should be read. Since Schubert’s paper is a critical response to my opportunity-based approach to normative economics, I assume that ‘whatever preferences they happen to have’ is a reference to my claim that, in a competitive market, every individual has the opportunity to get whatever she wants and is willing to pay for (e.g., McQuillin and Sugden, 2012). But ‘whatever she wants’ can include trying out new forms of consumption. In a market, entrepreneurs are incentivised to discover and supply experiments in consumption that individuals want to try and are willing to pay for (Sugden, 2018b). Perhaps the policy interventions that Schubert has in mind are nudges towards experimentation (see Schubert, 2015: 288–289). Hargreaves Heap (2023: 938) hints at a different interpretation when he commends Mill’s (1859/ 1972: 114–115) remarks about the importance of ‘experiments in living’. For Hargreaves Heap, experiments in living are valuable as ‘the material for critical reflection and discussion [which enables] the growth of an individual’s sense of autonomy’. For this, he says, it is not sufficient that opportunities for experiment are available for those who want to take them; agentic capabilities (see below) are necessary too.

Self-constraint. Because of the psychology of habituation, the self-creation of preferences may pose problems of dynamic choice: developing the preferences you want to hold in the future may be costly in the present. Familiar examples include learning to play a musical instrument and escaping from a harmful addiction. Dold and Stanton (2021) refer approvingly and at length to James Buchanan’s (1979) account of ‘becoming’ as ‘a central part, indeed probably the most important part, of life itself’. In this account, imposing constraints on yourself, or even authorising others to constrain you, are legitimate tools for self-creation. Schubert (2015) criticises my Opportunity Criterion for not recognising that self-imposed restrictions on opportunity sets can have positive value. The implication, I take it, is that public policy should sometimes support individuals in constraining themselves.

Behavioural effects as compromising autonomy. In a similar spirit to Deci and Ryan’s discussion of persuasive advertising, Dold and Stanton (2021: 9, emphasis in original) argue that unreflective conformity to social norms is inauthentic: ‘a person who simply does action ϕ because this means following the prevailing norm in her peer group—“it is what one does”—is living *inauthentically*’. Dold and Lewis (2023: 4) argue that choice overload and menu effects (i.e., cases in which a person’s preference ranking of two options varies according to whether a third option is or is not in the opportunity set) can reduce a person’s sense of autonomy and competence:

In such cases, notwithstanding larger choice sets, individuals may not fully identify with their choices, especially when they reflect on a series of choices and realise how much their preference formation process was shaped by, as Sugden puts it, ‘alien causal forces’.¹²

But, to repeat what I said about Deci and Ryan’s example of persuasive advertising, it is a peculiar conception of selfhood that treats psychologically normal responses to context as alien causal forces.

Agentic capabilities. Dold and Lewis (2023) argue that a person has an interest, not only in having a wide range of opportunity, but also in *agency*—in being ‘the author of their own life’. Following Amartya Sen (2002), they distinguish between two forms of valuable freedom—*opportunity freedom* (‘the availability of real, achievable options’) and *process freedom* (‘a person’s capacity to control the choice process’). To achieve process freedom, a person requires *agentic capabilities*. These capabilities include ‘the ability to assess choice options’, which may be compromised if the person feels ‘overwhelmed’ by ‘social manipulation’, ‘informational complexities’ or ‘the sheer number of options’.

So far, Dold and Lewis are in the realm of SDT’s innate psychological needs of competence and self-governance. A consumer who is fairly sure of his own preferences and is looking for a product that satisfies them can feel out of control of the search process if dealing with an importunate salesperson, or if he cannot translate product descriptions into the properties that matter to him, or if he faces a large number of alternative options in a setting that lacks signposts such as brand names, commonly known search terms or online filters. It is probably uncontroversial that most consumers value competence and self-governance in their transactions with firms, and that promoting the corresponding forms of agentic capability in retail markets is a proper function of market regulators.¹³ Similarly, individuals may value impartial sources of information about alternative options—for example, about the relative riskiness of different types of investment, or about relationships between diet and health.

¹² The reference is to Sugden (2018a: 98). In that passage, I argue that *the logic of the inner rational agent model* suggests that a person who is influenced by the attractive display of a supermarket product can think of herself as ‘responding to alien causal forces’, but I express scepticism about the claim that people commonly think in this way.

¹³ Lyons and Sugden (2023) discuss the role of market regulation in the context of my opportunity-based approach to normative economics.

However, Dold and Lewis's concept of agentic capability shares with SDT a strong emphasis on critical self-reflection and self-creation.¹⁴ Summarising their agentic approach, Dold and Lewis (2023: 7) say:

The possibility of enjoying process freedom requires people to possess certain agentic capabilities: the cognitive capacity to reflect on their evolving preferences and to engage with opportunities as they appear; the ability to imagine ways of exploiting those opportunities; and the capacity to evaluate those projects, assessing how well they cohere with and contribute to their broader goals and values.

Notice that these capabilities are not directly concerned with individuals' experiences of self-governance and competence in the settings in which actual choices are made. They are capabilities for engaging in a lifelong project of creating a unified sense of self.

This idea and its implications for public policy are presented more explicitly by Hargreaves Heap (2013: 995–996) in a passage which Dold and Lewis endorse:

Policy [should be] directed at the conditions under which people acquire the sense of interest on which they act. [...] There is perhaps no 'correct' preference to have that policy should support. Nevertheless, it still matters (or ought to) for those with liberal instincts that whatever action people take, they should feel they own it in the sense that they have had the resources to reflect on what preferences to hold and how to act on them.

And thus:

[A] behaviourally informed welfare economics would seem naturally to be concerned with the conditions (e.g., the educational system, the media, the family, vibrancy of the arts world) that support reflection on what preferences to hold.

On this view, self-creation is not merely a project for each individual; it is a proper concern of public policy. On my reading of Hargreaves Heap and of Dold and Lewis, their position is neither perfectionist nor paternalistic: their claim is that most people, on reflection, would recognise that they have an interest in possessing capabilities for self-creation. Schubert (2015: 281–282) is explicit that he is addressing citizens 'as they are' when he recommends the criterion of 'opportunity to learn'.¹⁵ I suspect that self-creation is further from many people's minds than the agentic approach supposes.¹⁶ Speaking for myself as a

¹⁴ Dold and Lewis (2023: 5, note 5) acknowledge that this emphasis is a departure from Sen's concept of 'process freedom' as 'active choice and freedom from external (social) coercion', which is closer to what I have called self-governance.

¹⁵ Dold and Stanton (2021) ground their version of the agentic approach on an existentialist philosophy. They treat existentialism as 'a branch of ethics that treats agency freedom and the quest for authenticity as central to human existence' (p. 3) but do not claim that this ethic is widely held.

¹⁶ For more on this, see my response to Schubert in Sugden (2015).

person in his seventies, thinking about what may lie ahead for me in life, how far I will continue to be able to satisfy my basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness and self-governance are hugely important matters. In comparison with those needs, reflection on why my preferences are as they are and whether I should try to change them are luxury items.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that self-determination theory is based on a credible model of innate psychological needs for competence, relatedness and self-governance. Nevertheless, its treatment of intrinsic motivation as the prototype of self-determination and its account of the ‘unified sense of self’ as a fundamental human aspiration provide poor guidance for psychologically normal human beings in a liberal society. That our attitudes are context-dependent is an unavoidable fact of human psychology, reflecting the non-hierarchical organisation of the human brain. As Nick Chater (2018) has put it, the mind is flat: it has no hidden depths of consistent thoughts and feelings waiting to be discovered, and the idea that we can create these depths for ourselves is an illusion. For analogous reasons, context-dependence is intrinsic to a society that is organised as a non-hierarchical network of voluntary interactions. Living with other people in such a society requires each person to internalise the purposes of different practices at different times and in different contexts. Even if each practice is mutually beneficial for its participants, different compromises have to be made with different people. There are no hidden depths of society-wide consistency that would allow an individual to integrate these purposes into a unified sense of self.

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