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Book Reviews

Edited Trevor Curnow

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Stefaan E. Cuypers

Self-Identity and Personal Autonomy; an analytical anthropology

Aldershot: Ashgate 2001, pp. ix + 172

ISBN 0754613097 (hb), £37.50

In this book, Stefaan Cuypers is rather like a doctor who misdiagnoses a patient's complaint, yet still manages to prescribe something beneficial. I find myself in much disagreement with what he thinks the problems about personal identity are and why they have arisen, but interested in some of the ways in which he tackles them, and even more so in their implications for personal autonomy.

He first focuses on two approaches to personal identity, which he calls the 'empiricist bundle' and 'metaphysical ego' theories (deriving principally from Hume and Descartes respectively). Others he regards as 'non-standard' including, importantly, those that focus in some way on bodily continuity. They 'either do not provide a clear alternative to the bundle theory or the ego theory, or else they can in some sense be reduced to one of these two' (p. 16). This strikes me as an oversimplification, and he makes matters worse by conflating self-identity and personal identity, thereby removing the need to give any account of what he thinks a person is. His criticisms of the 'empiricist bundle' theory seem to me to give too much weight to the uncertainties it may occasion. Not all uncertainties are eradicable, however undesirable we may find them, and not all questions about personal identity need have a clear yes-or-no answer. His own answers to questions about personal identity are firmly based upon the work of Strawson (1959).

He next moves on to the subject of personal autonomy, and here the book begins to hit its stride. In an extended discussion of the work of Gerald Dworkin and Harry Frankfurt, somewhat paradoxically (but quite coherently) he develops what he calls a 'moderately heteronomous' account of autonomy. Rightly discounting an ideal of radical but aimless freedom, he argues instead that genuine autonomy requires a 'loved object' outside ourselves. 'By providing guidance, the loved object liberates the person *from* his natural inner chaos and makes him free *for* the pursuit of what he truly loves' (p. 124). This guidance takes the form of what he calls 'volitional necessity'. Because of what we value, because of what kind of person this makes us, we feel bound to act in one way rather than another. The actual worth of what we value is assessed with reference to what Mead (1934) termed 'the generalized other', thereby acknowledging the significance of the social dimension. It is the 'loved object' and 'the generalized other' that constitute the heteronomous elements of the equation.

While the whole of the book makes for interesting reading, I feel there are rather too many false trails in the first part for it to be satisfying, although those new to the subject of personal identity may find it a useful introduction to many of the relevant discussions. The second part has much more of value to say and raises many important questions concerning the connection between freedom and autonomy.

Trevor Curnow

Reference

Mead, George Herbert (1934) *Mind, Self and Society*. (Chicago: Chicago UP.)