The Communicative Dimension of Personal Autonomy

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To cite this article:

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Abstract

Paul Benson and Andrea C. Westlund have proposed conceptualising personal autonomy in terms of the readiness to respond to criticism that targets the agent's actions and intentions (Benson) or commitments (Westlund). While incorporating this dialogical facet into a theory of personal autonomy is a step in the right direction, a theory of personal autonomy that is exclusively construed in terms of this facet and that posits discursive accountability as the sole criterion against which actions, choices, and commitments can be judged as autonomous or not is too restrictive and entails counterintuitive ideas. In this article, an alternative conceptualisation is proposed, one that avoids reductively construing personal autonomy exclusively in terms of the discursive and communicative facet and that conceptualises this facet in terms of communicative spaces which agents can claim authority over and in which and through which they can take ownership of claims, actions, and commitments. This alternative conceptualisation is initially formulated – by way of analogy – in terms of the normative requirement to respect the physical space of individuals. The article also outlines a set of conditions which indicate when one should claim authority over communicative spaces and the manner in which one takes ownership of claims, actions, and commitments in order to be autonomous.

Keywords: *personal autonomy; claiming authority; taking ownership; dialogical answerability; communicative dimension; communicative action; Jürgen Habermas*

I. Introduction

Paul Benson and Andrea C. Westlund have proposed accounts of personal autonomy that place the discursive capacity and process of justifying one's actions, choices, and commitments in the face

of criticism at the centre.[1] While I find their proposals to incorporate this capacity and process into a theory of autonomy a move in the right direction, I consider their accounts to be inadequate for a number of reasons. In this article – by also drawing from their accounts – I propose a different model of the communicative dimension of personal autonomy. Specifically, I argue three things. Firstly, I contend that the inclusion of the communicative dimension in a theory of autonomy is warranted by the fact that autonomy is an inescapable presupposition of linguistic communication. Secondly, I argue that a theory of personal autonomy cannot be reduced to just this dimension, and thus while a theory of personal autonomy should include the communicative dimension, it should be broader in order to include other dimensions as well. Thirdly, I contend that the communicative dimension of personal autonomy needs to be broadened and recalibrated to avoid the problems encountered by the accounts of Benson and Westlund.

The article is structured as follows. In the first part, I will present an overview of the accounts of Benson and Westlund and identify what I consider to be their major problems. In the second part, I will offer an argument for why the communicative dimension should be included in a theory of personal autonomy. While the argument I pose overlaps with some of the reasons Benson and Westlund give to support their positions, my argument attempts to show the inescapable intertwinement between our human capacity to communicate and personal autonomy. In the third part, I will suggest a different conceptualisation of the communicative dimension of personal autonomy that avoids the objections I present in the first section. Finally, in the fourth part, I will propose a number of conditions that have to be satisfied for a person to be said to be acting autonomously in the communicative dimension.

II. Personal autonomy as dialogical answerability and its limitations

Benson and Westlund are motivated partly,[2] by what they perceive as the inadequacy of previous theories of autonomy to satisfactorily explain how actions and choices can be said to be properly one's own.[3]

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[1] Paul Benson, "Taking Ownership: Authority and Voice in Autonomous Agency," in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, eds. John Christman and Joel Anderson, 101-126 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Andrea C. Westlund, "Rethinking Relational Autonomy," *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009): 26-49.

[2] I say 'partly' since Westlund is also interested in developing an account of autonomy that does not posit any substantive commitments as conditions of personal autonomy; Westlund, 28-30; 36-37.

[3] Benson, 101; Westlund, 27.

Benson targets a large family of theories he labels "identity-based the-ories,"[4] which, he claims, are theories that consider actions to be au-tonomous if and only if "they are appropriately related to my *identity* as a caring, reflectively willing creature."[5] Westlund's target is nar-rower, criticising a family of theories that take a structural approach to autonomy, in which actions and choices are deemed autonomous if and only if the highest-order criterion against which they are evaluated can claim agential authority.[6] Benson presents his model of personal autonomy as complete, asserting that autonomy should be understood exclusively in terms of the dimension of dialogical answerability (even though he claims that his proposed model needs to be developed fur-ther).[7] Conversely, Westlund claims that her account should be regard-ed as a "necessary and key component of autonomy"[8] and that she re-mains neutral as to whether it is sufficient.[9] In this section, I argue that the accounts of both Benson and Westlund are problematic, especially if taken as exclusivist[10] accounts of autonomy.

Benson's account is meant to deal with the question of autono-mous actions and intentions, as well as the capabilities needed to act autonomously; his account is thus concerned with local (concerning autonomy or lack thereof in particular actions and decisions) rather than global autonomy (concerning autonomy or lack thereof over the course of one's life).[11] He begins with a generic characterisation of what it means to act autonomously, defining it both as taking owner-ship of one's actions and as having the ability to do so and exercising such ability regularly.[12] This initial characterisation seems ambiguous as it is unclear whether an action qualifies as autonomous if the agent takes ownership of it or whether it suffices for the agent to have the ability to do so and exercise this ability regularly. Furthermore, it is

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[4] Benson, 102. For his criticism of this family of theories: Benson, 102-106.

[5] Ibid., 103.

[6] Westlund, 30-33.

[7] Benson, 118.

[8] Westlund, 28.

[9] See endnote 27 of Westlund, 46.

[10] As used in this article, the term "exclusivist account" refers to conceptualising personal au-tonomy exclusively in terms of the dialogical or communicative dimension. On the other hand, "inclusivist account" refers to conceptualising personal autonomy in terms of the dialogical or communicative dimension *and* other dimensions.

[11] See endnote 1 of Benson, 120.

[12] Ibid., 101.

also unclear whether Benson thinks that the agent needs to regularly take ownership of actions in general or regularly take ownership of actions of the same kind. Benson then defines what he means by taking ownership: to take ownership, that is, to make actions one's own, consists in "claiming authority to speak for their [i.e. actions'] intentions and conduct."[13] Claiming authority is further characterised as being in a position to answer for one's actions "in the face of potential criticisms."[14]

Benson further contends that taking ownership by claiming authority involves authorising oneself to do so. He explains that such authorisation can be implicit, akin to authorising one's partner to act on one's behalf simply by treating them as having such authority.[15] In this regard, authorising oneself may involve performing actions that grant authority only indirectly such as adopting an attitudinal stance that implicitly grants authority.[16] Authorisation can also be conscious and deliberate.[17] Benson also maintains that self-regard is central to self-authorisation; by self-regard, he means treating oneself as worthy of having the authority to speak on one's behalf. Indeed, he argues that one cannot claim authority unless one treats oneself as having it.[18]

Benson's exclusivist account is susceptible to the objection that his model of autonomy is both reactive and retroactive. If autonomy is reduced to taking ownership of one's actions by responding to criticism or simply having the ability and disposition to do so, what happens if one never faces criticism? It is entirely plausible to imagine a situation in which specific actions, even actions that might be life-informing, are never challenged by others. If autonomy is understood as responding to criticism, then actions that are never challenged are never appropriated as one's own. Similarly, if autonomy is understood as possessing the ability and disposition to respond to criticism, then actions that are never challenged are also never really appropriated as one's own. Taking ownership is necessarily an active process, and if something more than merely performing the action is required to make an action one's own, then this additional element cannot be merely an ability and a disposition. Abilities and dispositions do not make actions one's own;

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[13] Ibid., 102.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 114.

[16] Ibid., 115.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 115-116.

at best, they are powers that, if exercised and actualised, allow one to make an action one's own. Benson's account renders autonomy reactive, but autonomy understood as involving self-direction or self-governance is, by definition, proactive.

Benson's account is also susceptible to the objection of retroactivity. By retroactivity, I mean that a person can transform a past action into an autonomous one (i.e. one that they own) even if the original action would be a paradigmatically heteronomous action; such an action becomes autonomous retroactively. Benson acknowledges this and does not find it problematic. He asserts that ownership of an action is not dependent on whether the original action, which one then goes on to take ownership of, expressed one's "values" or whether one would have performed it upon "informed reflection."[19] This view implies that a person who, for example, succumbed to the pressure of a religious leader to do something they did not genuinely want to do, or would not have done in the absence of such pressure, would be acting autonomously if they later took ownership of such an action by responding to criticism. While I think that a theory of autonomy should allow for future appropriation of past actions – even of actions that would have been performed non-autonomously in the first instance – claiming that autonomy would be obtained retrospectively if one responded to criticism is counterintuitive and contradicts the core meaning of the notion of autonomy.

Westlund proposes a model similar to Benson's, which she defines as consisting of "a disposition for dialogical answerability."[20] Like Benson, she is concerned with local autonomy. She claims that for one to choose and act autonomously, "one must be open to engage with the critical perspectives of others."[21] Westlund expands dialogical answerability to include inner dialogue, wherein the person also responds to critics inhabiting "one's own moral imagination."[22] Such a disposition to answer critics shows, Westlund continues, that the person takes responsibility for one's commitments and does not endorse them passively.[23]

Westlund, unlike Benson, does not claim that an action performed in a "heteronomous" manner (think of a paradigmatically heterono-

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[19] Ibid., 109.

[20] Westlund, 35.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., 36.

[23] Ibid., 24.

mous action) becomes an autonomous one if it is eventually appropriated dialogically. On the one hand, she seems to understand autonomy more as a particular posture towards one's commitments, a kind of openness that gives the person a certain agentic flexibility by owning their commitments while leaving them open to scrutiny. On the other hand, however, she explicitly states that her account of autonomy concerns choice and action and, therefore, local autonomy.[24] If, as she states, Westlund's account is taken as explaining and accounting for autonomous choice and action, then it becomes problematic. According to this take, an action or choice is autonomous if and only if, both at the time of the performance of the action or the making of the choice and afterwards, the person maintains a certain openness to respond to criticism. It is entirely plausible, however, to imagine that a person can make a heteronomous choice or action, say due to pressure, even when possessing the kind of openness prescribed by Westlund's account. If Westlund's account is understood to mean that a disposition to dialogical answerability generates an autonomy-inducing posture without conferring autonomy to specific actions and choices, then it avoids the problem encountered by the first interpretation. In this case, contrary to what Westlund maintains, her account of autonomy would be more akin to global than to local autonomy.[25]

If understood in an exclusivist sense, Westlund's account would also be susceptible to the charge of reactivity. If a person is never met with challenges, their commitments remain untested and are never actively appropriated (by actually responding to critics). Westlund also contends that one may engage in inner dialogue to test one's commitments; this allows the person to test one's commitments even if no real critics challenge them. Extending dialogical answerability to solitary inner dialogue seems to me to be a move in the right direction. What I find problematic with Westlund's characterisation, however, is that she depicts what is commonly considered reflection as dialogue. Inner dialogue is a form of reflection, one that models itself on real dialoguing, but it certainly cannot be characterised as dialogue. No one in their right mind would say to an interlocutor: "I have conversed with you on this important issue in my imagination and have concluded the following." Doing so would be tantamount to depriving the interlocutor of their freedom to say what they wish in a real conversation, debasing the process of dialoguing. Construing reflection as dialogue also dilutes the crucial differences that distinguish the two processes. While

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[24] Ibid., 27.

[25] Ibid., 27.

inner dialogue is autonomy-enhancing, it certainly cannot substitute real dialogue. Westlund's inclusion of inner dialogue in her account of autonomy demonstrates the need for a broader, inclusivist account of autonomy that includes dialogical answerability but also other means of making something one's own such as solitary reflection.

III. Why does communication matter to personal autonomy?

Both Benson and Westlund offer compelling reasons for justifying why communicative capacities and processes are important to personal autonomy. Benson asserts that agents are the ones who should speak on their behalf because they "stand at the nodal point defined by the targeting of potential criticisms and the voicing of reasons in response."[26] In relational and communicative terms, any criticism of an action addresses the agent who performs the action. Such an address normatively requires that the agent speaks on their behalf.[27] In a similar vein, Westlund highlights the "interpersonal accountability" that commitments carry since they are assignable to the agent who holds such commitments and are not "assignable to anyone else."[28] She cites as an additional reason the fact that dialogicality characterises the sort of beings we are.[29] In this section, I present an argument that seeks to show why the dialogical or communicative facet of our way of being is central to autonomy. This argument overlaps with some of the reasons both Benson and Westlund provide, but it seeks a more radical grounding. I argue that autonomy is an inescapable presupposition of communication. To demonstrate why this is so, I use Jürgen Habermas's theory of communication.

In his work on communication, Habermas distinguishes between two paradigmatic forms of linguistically mediated interaction: communicative action and strategic action. These two forms of interaction share the characteristics of being conducted through the employment of the medium of language and involving two or more participants. The difference between the two hinges on the attitude adopted by the participants involved in the communicative process. Habermas defines communicative action as linguistically mediated interaction in which all participants' attitudes are oriented towards understanding.[30] In this

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[26] Benson, 109.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Westlund, 35.

[29] Ibid., 34.

[30] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), 286.

mode of communication, participants show a readiness to understand the point of view of other participants and an openness to be persuaded by the force of reason. Conversely, Habermas defines strategic action as a linguistically mediated interaction in which participants adopt a success-oriented attitude.[31] In this mode of communication, participants act instrumentally, aiming to influence the behaviour of others, possibly even of others who participate only as listeners.[32]

Habermas argues that communicative action is "the *original mode* of language use," with strategic action being parasitic in nature.[33] To show the fundamentality of communicative action and the parasitic character of strategic action, Habermas uses John L. Austin's speech-act theory and his distinction between illocution and perlocution. Illocution refers to the manner in which an utterance is to be taken, what Austin terms the "force" of a speech-act, which determines whether an act is an assertion, a question, a request, and so on.[34] Perlocutions, on the other hand, refer to the effects of the speech-act.[35] For instance, asking a question may be aimed at eliciting information but could also serve to ridicule, make an indirect assertion, and so forth.[36] Habermas links the act of reaching understanding to the illocutionary act: reaching an understanding consists, firstly, in the hearer *understanding* the illocution of the speaker; secondly, in the hearer *accepting* the offer made by the speaker through the utterance; and lastly, in the hearer *acting* in accordance with the conventional linguistic obligations that arise from the acceptance of the offer (such

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[31] Ibid.

[32] In a more detailed taxonomy of action types, Habermas divides strategic action into openly strategic action and latently strategic action. In case of the former, actors do not hide their intention to engage in strategic action, whereas in case of the latter, they do. Latently strategic action is then divided into manipulation and systemically distorted communication. Manipulation involves the deception of another communicative partner, whereas systemically distorted communication involves self-deception. Communicative action is then divided into action oriented toward reaching understanding and consensual action. The former refers to communicative action in which participants have to come to an understanding about the situation in which interaction takes place and the raised validity claims. In contrast, the former refers to action in which situation defining and raised validity claims are not problematised; Jürgen Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke, trans. Thomas McCarthy, 21-103 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 93.

[33] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 1*, 288. For another argument on why communication cannot be construed in purely instrumental terms: Jürgen Habermas, "Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Interactions, and the Lifeworld," in *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke, trans. Thomas McCarthy, 215-255 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 218-219.

[34] John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 99.

[35] Ibid., 101.

[36] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 1*, 288-289.

as answering a question).[37] Consequently, reaching understanding, which is the goal of communicative action, is directly and internally connected to the communicative success of illocutions. Conversely, strategic action is concerned with goals that are external to speech, generalised as influencing the behaviour of others through linguistic means, corresponding to Austin's perlocutions. Habermas argues that such goals can be achieved through linguistic means only because utterances can fulfil illocutionary goals.[38] For example, asking a question can serve to elicit information from a participant in a conversation, but also to influence the behaviour of other participants, as in the case of a question intended to belittle a political rival. The latter perlocutionary aim can be accomplished only because questions are primarily illocutionary devices meant to fulfil, above all, illocutionary aims. The dependence of perlocutions on illocutions shows, Habermas argues, that strategic action is parasitic on communicative action.

Building on the claim that communicative action is the fundamental form of communicative interaction, Habermas reconstructs the presuppositions of communicative action. He argues that when engaging in communicative processes aimed at achieving understanding, participants necessarily accept a number of presuppositions.[39] A central and crucial presupposition is accountability, which, he maintains, stems from the structure of linguistic communication.[40] Participants who intend to come to an understanding about something necessarily present themselves as accountable agents who are ready to justify such claims if required.[41] At the same time,

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[37] Ibid., 297.

[38] Ibid., 293.

[39] Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" 21.

[40] Habermas's view is discussed at length and partially contested by Joseph Heath who argues that while Habermas is right in concluding that linguistic communication cannot be adequately construed in exclusively instrumental terms, he is wrong in positing communicative action as the fundamental form of social action. Particularly, he argues that, in the case of norms, social actors are not committed to be held accountable as soon as they engage in communication but rather tend to engage in the practice of justifying norms in the case of disagreement because such practice is resourceful and "enjoys significant pragmatic advantages over the alternatives." I do not have the space to discuss Heath's criticism here. However, I contend that the inescapability of accountability in communication is oriented to understanding, at least in the case of truth, that claims cannot be dismissed without complications. A speaker who makes a truth claim and whose truth claim is challenged must bind themselves to justify their claim if they want to continue engaging in communication dedicated to understanding. It is hard to imagine how communication dedicated to understanding is possible without such commitment; Joseph Heath, *Communicative Action and Rational Choice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 161-171.

[41] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 2: Lifeworld and System, A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 100.

apart from presenting themselves as accountable agents, participants are ascribed the capacity to justify their claims by other participants in a conversation. By being addressed through speech-acts, such as being asked a question, or criticised, one is recognised as an accountable agent who can, and is expected to, justify their claims, answer questions, respond to objections, and so on. Underlying this presupposed accountability is the fact that in communicative action participants raise three validity claims that are, by their very nature, potentially contestable. The three validity claims are the claim to truth, the claim to normative rightness, and the claim to sincerity.[42] When a speaker utters a speech-act, they are, directly or indirectly, claiming that what they are saying is true, normatively appropriate, and that they sincerely reflect their own intentions. Consequently, every speech-act can be contested on any of these three grounds: a hearer can retort by claiming that the content of the speaker's speech-act is false or doubtful, that the speech-act is normatively inappropriate, or that the intention purported to be expressed by the speech-act is insincere.

I want to argue that the presupposition of accountability must, in turn, presuppose something even more fundamental: the presupposition of having the authority to speak on one's behalf. A person who ascribes accountability to themselves and is ascribed such accountability by others is a person who at the same time is ascribed—both by oneself and others—the authority to decide on what to say and not to say, the authority to take ownership of claims, actions, and commitments through linguistic means, and the authority to retract and modify their claims as they see fit. The presupposition of the authority to speak on one's behalf projects the person who has such authority as the agent who has rightful control over when such authority is exercised, how it is exercised, and the subject matter over which it is exercised. This presupposed authority is nothing other than the presupposition of the right to exercise self-direction and self-governance within conversational contexts.[43]

The authority to speak on one's behalf is presupposed and ascribed in processes of communicative action even when the possibility of being held accountable is remote or practically non-existent. For instance, in a conversation where X asks Y if they prefer coffee or tea, Y is presupposed

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[42] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 1*, 310.

[43] It is worth noting here that Maeve Cooke uses the work of Habermas to derive a notion of autonomy as rational accountability in a similar vein to how it's depicted above. However, the conception of autonomy she develops remains narrow because it only concerns rational accountability. The argument I am making here points to something more fundamental: the presupposition and the ascription by both self and others of having the authority to speak on one's behalf; Maeve Cooke, "Habermas, Autonomy and the Identity of the Self," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 18, nos. 3-4 (1992): 269-291.

to have the authority to speak on their behalf even if their simple responses ("coffee" or "tea") are only remotely related, if at all, to the possibility of holding Y accountable. This is because the presupposition of possessing the authority to speak on one's behalf is not dependent on the presupposition of accountability (even if the latter presupposes the former) and is instead presupposed by the general use of speech in communicative action processes. Another example further reinforces this point. In a conversational context where participants are asked about their feelings regarding a proposed policy change, the speakers who express their feelings are ascribed the authority to speak on their behalf *in the first instance* independently of any ascription of accountability. Therefore, while accountability necessarily presupposes the authority to speak on one's behalf, the latter presupposition is not dependent on the presupposition of accountability.

Accountability and the authority to speak on one's behalf are only presuppositions, albeit inescapable ones in communicative action and discourses that might ensue from communicative action.[44] Whether one lives up to these ascriptions is a different matter. One might find oneself in a conversation where others afford one accountability and authority but fails to act in a way that actualises such ascriptions in practice. One might be asked a question and is too timid to speak or lacks the kind of self-regard Benson speaks about. Or one might utter a claim but, because of a lack of self-confidence, retract it immediately as soon as others object to it. One might also, for example due to shame, fail to present one's views and oneself as a partner in conversation who can carry out a conversation with others. Similarly, if one is ignored and therefore not ascribed accountability and authority, one can hardly actualise them in conversational contexts. One might attempt to express one's view but receive a close-ended reply meant to stop the conversation from developing, or one might be shut up by others. One might even be systematically ignored. These considerations suggest that even though accountability and the authority to speak on one's behalf are presuppositions of communicative action, their actualisation in practice in conversational settings depends both on the person having certain capacities (broadly construed), such as self-confidence and self-regard, and on others being willing to recognise such qualities.

Understanding autonomy narrowly as accountability or answerability, even if autonomy is understood inclusively (i.e. not exclusively in terms of a dialogical dimension), fails to account for some of the situations mentioned above. Some of the situations mentioned above concern not an

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[44] In the work of Habermas, the term "discourse" refers to argumentation that seeks to resolve disagreements about truth claims (theoretical discourse) or norms of actions (practical discourse); Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 1*, 19.

inability or lack of willingness to be held accountable, but rather an inability or lack of willingness to claim authority to speak on one's behalf. In his account of autonomy, Benson does consider cases that fall under this latter category. He contends that a person can become socially invisible by being treated as invisible by others and by internalising such invisibility. He also asserts that a person can internalise such social invisibility even when one is not systematically treated as invisible.[45] The only issue I have with Benson's account on this specific point is that he has conceptualised autonomy as answerability as being fundamentally reactive (one's autonomy is understood as being ready to speak for oneself "in the face of potential criticisms"),[46] while social invisibility is an issue—as his treatment of the issue seems to suggest—that goes beyond merely being ready to face the potential criticisms of others (i.e. accountability). The autonomy of the socially invisible person—whether such invisibility stems from a lack of self-regard, is somehow imposed on them by others, or some combination of both—suffers mostly not because they are unable to face potential criticisms, but rather because by failing to make good of the authority ascribed to them, they are unable to assert their own selfhood in public (here public is to be understood loosely encompassing even a conversation with just one other person) through self-direction in conversational contexts. Social invisibility renders the person selfless in public and there can be no autonomy without the *autos* or self. The "self" in the idea of the invisible self should not be understood in some deep metaphysical sense but in the more ordinary sense of an individual, person, or agent who can be ignored or treated as non-existing. These considerations suggest that while the issue of accountability is essential for theorising the communicative dimension of autonomy, the theorisation of autonomy in the communicative dimension must be broadened to include more than just answerability.

IV. Communicative spaces, claiming authority, and taking ownership

In the previous section, I maintained that the presupposition and ascription of having the authority to speak on one's behalf is at the same time the presupposition and ascription of self-direction and self-government in communicative processes. In this section I want to offer a conceptualisation of linguistic communicative processes that can account not only for the possibility of communicative subjects being held accountability but also, and more importantly, for the inescapable presupposition that communicative subjects have the authority to speak

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[45] Benson, 111-114.

[46] Benson, 102.

on their behalf. While accountability remains an important notion for conceptualising personal autonomy in this dimension, the authority to speak on one's behalf takes centre stage and becomes the foundational notion in this dimension. By placing the ascription of authority at the centre, I broaden the conceptualisation of this dimension to include communicative interactions that are not immediately related to accountability and avoid the objection of reactivity that I have levelled against the accounts of Benson and Westlund. The terms "claiming authority" and "taking ownership" are adopted from Benson's account but are reconfigured to serve the conception developed below.

In the conceptualisation I develop in this section, the communicative dimension is conceived in terms of communicative spaces that allow persons to assert themselves as competent and authoritative subjects who speak on their behalf and take ownership of claims, actions, and commitments. In order to explain what these communicative spaces are, I want to characterise them analogously to the physical distance persons feel they need to have between themselves and others when in the presence of others or when interacting with others. The latter is the field of study generally called proxemics.[47] This characterisation of the communicative dimension in terms of the spatial metaphor of physical distance persons feel they need to have between themselves and others foregrounds a number of characteristics that are useful for the conceptualisation of the communicative dimension of personal autonomy.[48]

The space people feel they need to have between themselves is affected by culture, situational context, and the nature of the relationship amongst the people concerned. In some sense, people feel that the physical space surrounding them belongs to them. They also generally feel they have authority over such space, and such authority prescribes that they ought to be the ones to determine who enters such space, when, and in what manner. While the physical space surrounding the person is always present, it starts having any manifest normative bearing as soon as one is in the presence of others, and it

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[47] Edward T. Hall, who coined the term proxemics, defined it as "the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialised elaboration of culture." In his seminal work, *The Hidden Dimension*, Hall distinguishes between types of distances: intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, and public distance; Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 1; 113-129.

[48] Like any other metaphor, this has limitations and remains only a vehicle through which specific features of the communicative dimension are pictured and made explicit. To use another metaphor about the metaphor of physical distance, the metaphor of physical distance is like a ladder that helps one reach a certain point, beyond which it isn't possible to reach points higher than the ladder itself.

becomes phenomenologically visible once it is near-invaded or invaded by others. When a person's personal space is near-invaded, they can claim authority implicitly or explicitly through bodily cues and movements. When such space is invaded, the person can also, implicitly or explicitly, reclaim such space by moving backwards to leave what one deems an appropriate distance between oneself and others. Finally, the person's authority over personal space exists because the person accepts it as existing and is recognised as existing by others. For example, the persistently bullied child whose space might have been repeatedly breached by others might come to believe that they have no authority over their surrounding space. Personal space is therefore characterised by five features: first, it starts having any normative bearing as soon as one is in the presence of others; second, it belongs to the person who has authority over it; third, it can be invaded; fourth, it can be claimed and reclaimed; and, finally, its existence depends on the person and others recognising it as existing.

The five features characterising physical space also, analogously, characterise communication between persons and the communicative spaces generated by linguistic communication. In a simple communicative interaction between two persons, A and B, the interaction generates communicative spaces that belong conjointly and separately to A and B. I say "conjointly" because the generation of communicative spaces requires the cooperative participation of at least two persons, and "separately" because, notwithstanding the joint ownership of the communicative process, within this process, A and B possess separate communicative spaces over which each participant has normative authority. Thus, for example, if A asks a question to B and B replies, B would be accepting the invitation of A to initiate a joint communicative process. By answering the question, B would also be occupying the communicative space afforded to them by the cooperative, communicative process.

Communicative spaces always exist potentially for persons capable of communicating, but they start having normative bearing as soon as at least two persons are in a position to initiate a conversation and in a more pronounced manner as soon as the communicative process is initiated. The norms governing a communicative interaction can be numerous and vary according to the nature of the conversation. Norms relevant to the filling in of communicative spaces in communication oriented to understanding include allowing the partner in communication to speak for themselves, allowing them to express their views, and giving them a fair share of time to express what they would like to ex-

press.[49] These norms are tied to autonomous acting in that, if respected, they allow the participant in conversation to exercise self-direction in the communicative interaction.

The norms mentioned above indicate that in communicative interactions persons involved in the interaction have authority over their respective communicative spaces. Unlike in the case of personal space, communicative spaces cannot be delineated and measured with precision; this is so since communicative spaces cannot be measured quantitatively. However, violations of certain norms clearly show that such communicative spaces do indeed emerge in communication (particularly, in communicative action). The existence of such norms becomes manifest, for example, when person A asks a question to B and then goes on to answer the question instead of B, and when B, in answering a question, gives an excessively long-winded answer without allowing the partner in conversation to have a say in turn. These violations can be met with interjections and protests, such as when B points out that they are not allowed to answer the question that was addressed to them in the first place, or such as when A makes it clear that they would like to have another say in the conversation. These violations and their responses show not only that such communicative spaces exist, and that they belong to different persons engaged in the conversation, but also that, like personal space, communicative spaces can be invaded, claimed, and reclaimed.

Finally, communicative spaces which are owned by persons engaged in a conversation only exist if they are recognised as existing both by the person who potentially possesses ownership over such spaces and by others who are ready to engage in conversation with the said person. If B feels uncomfortable answering the question posed by A and pretends they did not hear what A said, or if B thinks that it is not worth answering the question of A, then communicative spaces fail to emerge or they are brought into existence for a very short period. In extreme cases, when a person is systematically ignored, they may even fail to have a chance to have a say, to express their view, and, therefore, to claim authority over any communicative spaces as such spaces are never recognised as theirs by other potential communicators.

Autonomy in the communicative dimension can be conceptualised in terms of two types of acts: the claiming of authority over communicative spaces that normatively belong to the communicators and the

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49 The norms I have in mind are procedural in character. The idea of procedural norms is, of course, Habermasian in spirit; Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 89.

taking ownership of claims, actions, and commitments in the ensuing communicative processes. Understood in this way, autonomy in the communicative dimension involves performing two acts—claiming authority and taking ownership – which generally can only be distinguished analytically. When a person claims authority over a communicative space, the person would be presenting themselves as an agent who can speak for oneself, stand for oneself, and speak one's mind. In doing so, the person would be disclosing themselves to others as a competent and self-governing person with a unique perspective who owns this unique perspective and who is authorised to speak for it. Timidness, shame, and lack of self-worth generally make their toll felt by making claiming authority burdensome or even impossible to execute. Once a person starts engaging in a communicative process, they can then, through the production of utterances, actualise in practice what the claiming of authority presented only abstractly: that one speaks for oneself, that one expresses one's perspective, and so on. Communicative processes allow the person to take ownership of their claims, actions, and commitments, not just by defending them against criticisms but also by merely articulating them in linguistic form. A person who asserts their gay identity to their friends is already taking ownership of such an identity even without thinking about potential criticisms or positioning themselves as ready to answer criticisms. Of course, the ideal of personal autonomy also demands that one is ready to answer criticisms but, in certain situations, merely expressing one's views qualifies as acting autonomously.

Conceptualising autonomy in the communicative dimension in terms of the act of claiming authority over communicative spaces can account for situations of state-generated oppression that accounts of autonomy as a disposition to face criticisms cannot. In a state in which citizens have limited or no freedom of speech and are not allowed to engage in real discussions about matters of collective interest, accounts of autonomy as mere dialogical answerability are incapable of explaining protests and resistance as acts of claiming and reclaiming authority. In such oppressive scenarios, persons can have the disposition to respond to potential criticisms without actually being allowed to engage in real dialogue. Conceptualising the communicative dimension as claiming authority over communicative spaces could explain protests and resistance as acts intended to claim authority over communicative spaces that normatively belong to protestors. Therefore, the conceptualisation I am proposing also has the potential of explaining political acts of the kind just mentioned as autonomous acts intended to claim and reclaim autonomy.

The act of claiming authority over communicative spaces concerns both local and global autonomy. Claiming authority can function as an instantiation of local autonomy, but more importantly, being disposed to and actually claiming authority in various situations means adopting an autonomous and autonomy-inducing posture in social interaction. Similarly, taking ownership of claims, actions, and commitments through communicative processes concerns both local and global autonomy. Like the disposition to claim authority over communicative spaces, taking ownership of claims, actions, and commitments can also develop into an autonomy-conducive posture. The person who has global autonomy in this dimension develops a general readiness to take ownership of claims, actions, and commitments in conversational contexts. Moreover, taking ownership in communicative processes allows the person to target specific claims, actions, and commitments, some of which have local ramifications, some of which have global relevance. One can take ownership of a claim that is not life-informing and concerns a specific situation, but one can also take ownership of a commitment which asserts one's identity in public. Therefore, contrary to Benson and Westlund, I assert that the communicative dimension of autonomy concerns both local and global autonomy.

Taking ownership of claims, actions, and commitments in communicative processes can be retroactive, but not in the sense Benson advocates. Through speech-acts, persons can appropriate past claims, actions, and commitments; however, such appropriation does not make them autonomous retrospectively. Past claims, actions, and commitments may become autonomously held through appropriation, but this does not mean that the present absolves the past. A person might decide to pursue a particular career out of pressure from one's father, but then in the future appropriates such career as one's own. In my view, while the original choice would have been heteronomous, its appropriation might now make holding to the career autonomous. Claiming authority and taking ownership can also be reactive, but they need not be. Competent communicators can claim authority by initiating conversations, such as when a gay person discloses their identity to friends. This way of viewing the communicative dimension of autonomy avoids the objections of retroactivity and reactivity I discussed above.

The question that follows from this rendition of the communicative dimension of autonomy is: what conditions must be satisfied for claiming authority and taking ownership through speech to be autonomous? The act of claiming authority is self-satisfying and self-referential; one claims authority over a communicative space by speaking and, when

one speaks, one claims such authority. No other higher-order criteria must be satisfied for one to claim authority and there is no heteronomous claiming authority; one either claims authority or one does not. The question that must be answered with regard to claiming authority is: when is one required to claim authority; in other words, when is one required to speak to be said to be autonomous? I will return to this question in the next section.

The act of taking ownership is more complex. First of all, it must be made clear that the act of taking ownership through utterances in dialogical settings is just one way among various which persons use to make actions, claims, and commitments one's own. Claiming that this is the only way (and thus endorse an exclusivist conception) persons use to make actions, claims, and commitments their own leaves out other important means persons use to take ownership. Solitary reflection coupled with intrapersonal assent is another way.[50] One can, for example, reflect on an issue and, as a result of such reflection, endorse a particular view. Even non-linguistic actions can function as means of taking ownership. Actively working for a particular cause can function as making the cause one's own. Indeed, persons take ownership through these three means: speech and its use in dialogical settings, solitary reflection and intrapersonal assent, and non-linguistic actions. These three means can of course function in a coordinated fashion and, sometimes, taking ownership requires that one means complements another. A person who endorses a cause through the expression of external (in dialogue) or internal (in solitary reflection) assent would be expected—obviously depending on the nature of what is endorsed—to follow through by performing certain actions. For example, taking ownership of the commitment to save a particular species requires that one follow through by performing actions intended to promote the well-being of the species; sometimes, in the absence of such following through, doubts can be raised as to whether an agent has actually made such commitment one's own. Situations which call for complementarity and coordination between the various means of taking ownership further show the shortcomings of exclusivist accounts.

The above considerations show that giving a complete account of what is involved in taking ownership of claims, actions, and commitments through utterances necessitates that one gives a broader

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[50] Maeve Cooke makes the important point that autonomy requires that one has a "solitary space" to which one can retreat to in order to reflect on one's actions and commitments. The acceptance of this view further shows the inadequacy of conceptualising personal autonomy exclusively in dialogical and communicative terms; Maeve Cooke, "A Space of One's Own: Autonomy, Privacy, Liberty," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 25, no. 1 (1999): 31.

account of autonomy. The kind of broader account I have in mind is one that posits various dimensions of autonomy which can at times function independently, but which can also at times require interdimensional coordination.[51] Due to the complex nature of the issue and the limitation of space, I cannot go into the broader issue of a general theory of autonomy. I will, in the next section, offer a general characterisation of how taking ownership through utterances can be said to be autonomous.

V. The "when" of claiming authority and the "how" of taking ownership

In this section, I deal with the two questions raised above. The first concerns claiming authority over communicative spaces and can be formulated as follows: when is one required to claim authority over communicative spaces? Surely, a theory of the communicative dimension of personal autonomy cannot prescribe that one ought to speak whenever one has the possibility of speaking. There are instances when autonomous persons can, and sometimes should, retreat from a conversation or not engage in one in the first place. The second concerns taking ownership and can be formulated as follows: how does one take ownership through speech autonomously? Autonomous actions and conduct do not ensue simply because one takes ownership of actions, claims, and commitments in speech – the manner of such taking ownership is crucial for a theory of autonomy. I will tackle these two questions in this order.

I want to propose that there are four types of situations in which the ideal of autonomy demands that a person claim authority over a communicative space. This means that failure to claim authority over communicative spaces in these types of situations would typically be a heteronomous failure to claim authority. The assessment of whether a failure to claim authority over a communicative space should count as a heteronomous act or conduct requires that one view such failure and assess one's autonomy, or lack thereof, over time.

The first type of situation is when the possibility of claiming authority over communicative spaces in the present and future is systematically threatened or circumscribed. This parallels what happens in re-

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[51] The account presented in this article is compatible with various theories of personal autonomy. Compatibility rests on the theory satisfying two conditions: first, it must include or have space for a communicative dimension, and second, it must not define autonomy exclusively in terms of the communicative dimension. The multidimensional theory of personal autonomy I have in mind is one comprised of three dimensions: the communicative dimension, the evaluative dimension, and the self-definition dimension.

claiming personal space when it is near-invaded or invaded. When one's authority over the physical space one owns is threatened or invaded, one protects such authority by reclaiming such space as one's own. In the case of the communicative dimension of personal autonomy, the threat or systematic circumscription of the possibility of claiming authority over communicative spaces can generally be preserved, though neither exclusively nor invariantly so,[52] by claiming authority over present communicative spaces in general or in particular (depending on the situation). Protests against restrictions on freedom of speech, protests against being systematically ignored, and protests against being repeatedly prevented from having a say are concrete illustrations of when one claims authority over a communicative space to preserve present and future opportunities to claim authority over communicative spaces.

The second type of situation is when the possibility of being autonomous in a general sense is being threatened (note: I argued above for an inclusivist theory of personal autonomy). Situations that fall under this type include when the range of options one can choose from in one's life is drastically reduced[53] and when one's freedom is being unjustifiably diminished. The content of this criterion also depends on the general theory of autonomy within which the theory of the communicative dimension of autonomy is embedded.

The third type of situation is when one's dignity is threatened. As I understand it, "dignity" refers to a collection of characteristics, conditions, and capacities that are generally thought to be necessary for potentially attaining material, emotional, and social well-being. This third type of situation generally overlaps with the second type; such threats to one's dignity generally impact one's autonomy directly or indirectly. Mistreatments that fall under the former category include having one's freedom restricted unjustifiably and the withholding of pertinent information on one's personal or collective affairs unjustifiably. In the latter's case, mistreatments do not directly impact the possibility of being autonomous but might do, and generally do so, indirectly. Mistreatments that fall under this latter category include systematic prejudices against oneself as being a possessor of a charac-

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[52] I said "neither exclusively nor invariantly so" because sometimes systematic circumscription calls for more drastic measures, such as systematic civil disobedience and active and violent resistance.

[53] As Joseph Raz argues, autonomy requires an adequate range of options. While a reduction of options is not in itself autonomy-inhibiting, when this is drastically reduced it becomes an issue for the actualisation of personal autonomy; Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 373-376.

teristic that makes one a member of a mistreated category. Characteristics of this kind include being black, gay, a woman, and the like. Such mistreatments impact the social standing of oneself as a competent and autonomous person. When one suffers such mistreatments, one's ability to conduct oneself autonomously is generally diminished.

The fourth type of situation is when one is faced with criticism on actions one has performed, claims one has assented to, or commitments one has endorsed. The ideal of autonomy does not demand that one is expected to answer to any criticism, but as Westlund argues, one is expected to respond only to legitimate challenges. According to her, for a challenge to be legitimate, it must at least satisfy two conditions. The first condition is termed by Westlund "relational situatedness." What she means by this is that the offer to engage in dialogue must make sense within the relationship between the involved persons. The legitimacy of the intervention is derived from the nature of the relationship. While it might make sense to discuss a particular issue with one's spouse, it might not make sense to discuss it with a stranger. In this sense, relationships become "sense-giving relationships," and different relationships vary in the sense they impart to issues.[54] Sense-giving relationships can be broad, such as being a citizen of a state, or narrow, such as the relationship between a mother and a daughter. The second condition given by Westlund is termed "context-sensitivity." What Westlund means by this is that the person raising the challenge must be open to a variety of responses that take into consideration the ability and experience of the person expected to provide an answer to a challenge.[55] Thus, a person may respond by indicating that she will think about the matter, by explaining how the issue makes sense within her life narrative, or even by "tell[ing] parables or other stories."[56]

Westlund's two conditions are reasonable; they need, however, to be developed further. Concerning the condition of relational situatedness, I argue that one must add that a sense-giving relationship cannot render an invitation illegitimate if the grounds that make the invitation illegitimate are themselves autonomy-inhibiting. Sense-giving in relationships is grounded in accepted norms and social expectations, but such norms and expectations can themselves be heteronomy-conducive. For example, a relationship between a religious leader and a religious follower might proscribe questioning the authority of the religious leader; the norms and expectations governing the relationship

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[54] Westlund, 39.

[55] Ibid., 40.

[56] Ibid.

might prescribe that one ought to follow the authority of the religious leader blindly. In such a case, questioning the authority of the religious leader would not "make sense." Such norms and expectations contradict the very idea of autonomy. Thus, while challenges or invitations need to derive their legitimacy from the relationship between potential interlocutors, grounds that may withhold legitimation cannot themselves be autonomy-inhibiting, such as blindly accepting authority. Regarding context-sensitivity, the variety of responses tolerated must be within specific rational parameters that respect certain inescapable rational criteria. Thus, while a legitimate challenge needs to be sensitive to the ability and experience of the individual, such openness to variation in responses cannot extend to include responses that violate basic rational criteria. Telling parables or referring to one's experience might be legitimate responses, but if, for example, a parable obscures the matter under discussion or an appeal to one's experience turns out to be characterised by confirmation bias, they no longer remain legitimate responses.

As claimed above, communication also provides one with the possibility to take ownership of claims, actions, and commitments through the use of speech. In essence, taking ownership means expressing assent, but this ranges from simple assent to a more complex defence of an action, claim, or commitment. As argued above, taking ownership through speech is only one way of making something one's own. The "when" of taking ownership is subject to the "when" of claiming authority; the ideal of autonomy demands that one takes ownership when one of the four types of situations described above subsists. What needs to be explained now is how one takes ownership autonomously. The distinction between taking ownership autonomously and taking ownership non-autonomously is required since it is entirely plausible to imagine taking ownership of a claim, action, or commitment, being heteronomous.

On the assumption that one has the necessary linguistic-communicative competence to take ownership of claims, actions, and commitments through the use of language, and on the assumption that one has exercised such competence correctly (e.g. one utters words like "yes" or "I agree" or any functionally equivalent word or words to express assent), taking ownership through the use of language requires fulfilling three conditions. These conditions are intra-dimensional conditions and, as I explained above, a complete account requires also looking at interdimensional conditions when interdimensional coordination is required.

The first condition is having a basic understanding of what one is taking ownership of. This condition implies that accepting claims without understanding the content of what one accepts is a heteronomous form of taking ownership. While a person who expresses assent in ignorance would be, in a superficial sense, taking ownership of a claim, such taking ownership does not qualify as taking ownership in the deeper sense of truly making a claim one's own. A paradigmatic case of such assenting in ignorance is accepting terms of service and data policies without reading them.[57]

The second condition is that the possibility of not taking ownership of what one takes ownership of is considered as a possibility by the person taking ownership. This does not entail that one must have experienced indecision in the process that led one to take ownership of something, nor that taking ownership and not taking ownership must have been given equal weight, but only that the person considers not taking ownership of what one took ownership of as possible in a practical sense. This condition allows for distinguishing between inescapable belonging, mere acceptance, and taking ownership in the deeper sense of making something truly one's own. Features (broadly construed) that are truly inescapable are outside the province of taking ownership. These generally include gender, sexual orientation, and the native language. This is not to say that these features, which are generally identity-forming and life-informing, are heteronomy-conducive but only that their inescapability makes their possession outside the reach of agency. However, a person can take ownership at a second-order level by taking ownership of the *fact* that one is of a particular gender or the *fact* that one has a particular sexual-orientation. The need for these second-order taking ownership becomes important for one's autonomy when such characteristics are grounds for mistreating a person. Mere acceptance subsists when a person takes ownership of something, such as a religious claim – without having ever considered the possibility of not owning it.

The third condition is openness to reasons, which includes readiness to face criticism, and the attitudinal ability to give up what one takes ownership of. This condition is important since it highlights that taking ownership is not a one-time affair but a commitment that can be tested and retested after the initial taking ownership. Having

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[57] As one notable study demonstrates, this mode of taking ownership of commitments is widespread on the internet; Jonathan A. Obar and Anne Oeldorf-Hirsch, "The Biggest Lie on the Internet: Ignoring the Privacy Policies and Terms of Service Policies of Social Networking Services," *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 1 (2018): 128-147.

openness to reasons, readiness to face criticism, and the attitudinal ability to give something up generates a certain agentic flexibility that allows the person to renew the ownership. This condition does not mean that persons must reduce themselves to perfect rational automata constantly changing their views in view of what appears to be the best available evidence and arguments. Even having a hunch can count as a good reason to hold to a belief. What this condition entails is that persons, if they are to take ownership autonomously, cannot avoid testing their views out of, say, a misplaced emotional commitment to a truth claim, or out of fear of being shamed (this being always subject to the four criteria of claiming authority outlined above).

VI. Conclusion

In this article, I argued that a theory of personal autonomy must account for what I have referred to as the communicative dimension. I also argued that, while a theory of personal autonomy must account for the communicative dimension, it cannot be reduced to this dimension. The inclusion of this dimension is necessitated by the fact that communicative processes necessarily presuppose that communicators have the authority to speak on their behalf; to speak on one's behalf, I contended, means to exercise self-direction in communicative processes. While drawing from the accounts of Benson and Westlund, the model I proposed avoids the charges of retrospectivity (levelled against Benson) and reactivity (levelled against both Benson and Westlund). In my account, the communicative dimension is conceptualised in terms of claiming authority over communicative spaces and taking ownership of actions, claims, and commitments in communicative processes. Unlike the accounts of Benson and Westlund, my account concerns both local and global autonomy and has the potential of being applied to political acts. Claiming authority and taking ownership, I also argued, must fulfil specific conditions: in the case of claiming authority, these conditions concern the "when" of when a person must claim authority to retain or reclaim autonomy and the "how" of taking ownership so that the latter is conducted autonomously.

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