Self-Creation as a Literary and Philosophical Problem

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**Description**

Can we choose who to be? Consider the deepest facts about a person: her moral conscience, her intellectual development, her aesthetic and emotional sensibility. It is impossible to deny that each of these features of a person is shaped by environmental and genetic forces that lie outside of her control. And yet many of us do have a powerful sense, typically heightened during early adulthood, that we have some ability—an ability that is not itself reducible to environment or genes—to influence what kinds of people we become.

We will explore the question of the possibility of self-creation from two angles concurrently. The first is philosophical. In the philosophical literature, we will want to disentangle the question of whether I can freely shape myself from somewhat more general questions of freedom of the will and moral responsibility. We will begin with Nietzsche's (seeming?) rejection of the possibility of self-creation in *Beyond Good and Evil* §21: “The *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far, it is a sort of rape and perversion of logic….the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* and, with more than Munchhausen's audacity, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness.” The paradoxes do, indeed, seem to swarm: how can *something* come from *nothing*? (*creation ex nihilo*) And how is it possible for *me* to create *myself*—if there is already a “me,” what more work needs to be done? (vicious circularity) And who created me? Whoever she is, who created her? (infinite regress).

The second angle is literary. We will ask whether the problems of creation *ex nihilo*, regress, and circularity resonate with the treatment of the topic we find in novels portraying efforts at self-development. The author of a Bildungsroman, or novel of education, depicts a young adult actively working to make herself into something. By the end, it is clear that she has had a hand in shaping every aspect of the person she becomes. Her self bears, as it were, her own signature. And yet these authors do not shy away from presenting that same person as the product of immense social, cultural and economic pressures, of portraying the influence on her of a domineering parent or a brilliant friend. This literature thus provides us with an ideal source of material with which to investigate and reflect on the paradox of self-creation. We will ask: is the fact that people are shaped inconsistent with the claim that they shape themselves? If not, how do we fit these two strands of human development—the passive and the active—together?

**Course Requirements**

(1) Reading: Students are expected to complete all reading assignments before coming to the relevant class and also to bring the text and notebook to each session.

(2) Talking: Students are expected to attend all class meetings, and to actively participate in both lecture and discussion sections. Participation entails both asking questions and being prepared to answer them.

(3) Writing: You will write 2 papers for this class (P1 = 6-8 pages, P2 = 8-10 pages)

N.b. You may propose your own paper topic, however, it must be approved by your CA no more than 1 week before the paper is due.

**Grading:** P1 = 35% P2 = 45% Participation = 20%

**Reading Schedule**

Part I: James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Week 1: Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* §21, Gay Science §290, §360; *Portrait* to p.59 (I)
Week 2: Galen Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility."; Portrait to p.101 (II)
Week 3: Gary Watson, “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil”; Portrait to p.146 (III)
Week 4: Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person”; Portrait to p.174 (IV)
Week 5: Susan Wolf, “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility, ” finish Portrait

Part II: Elena Ferrante’s My Brilliant Friend

Week 6: L.A. Paul, 'Becoming a Vampire'; 'What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting'; Ferrante through p.67
Week 8: David Velleman, “Motivation by Ideal.” Ferrante through p.191
Week 10: Ferrante only (no class on Thurs.: reading period) (finish Ferrante)

Policies

(1) All devices with an ON/OFF switch—laptops, phones, ipads, kindles etc.—must be switched off during class.

(2) Unexcused absence or lateness is not permitted.

(3) No plagiarism (you are expected to know what constitutes plagiarism; if you don’t, please do not hesitate to ask the professor or CA).