The Network Self: Relation, Process, and Personal Identity* (**Kathleen Wallace, Routledge, 2019)*

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In *The Network Self* Kathleen Wallace develops a relational theory of the self. When stated this way the idea may not sound unusual or new because we are familiar with many conceptions of the self in which social relations play a defining role. This view, however, is different in that the relations are not limited to the social, and more centrally, the relations are not simply important to the nature of the self but are in fact constitutive of it. This is a theory of the self in which the self is constituted by its relations. Moreover, in addition to being relationally constituted, the self on this theory is a process, which suggests that at any point in time, the character of the self is cumulative. Wallace refers to her view, then, as the CNM, or Cumulative Network Model of the self.

The CNM is a naturalist, though not physicalist, approach to the nature of the self. Because the self is understood as constituted by its relations, the self is inextricably enmeshed in its many contexts and environments – material, biological, historical, social, cultural, linguistic, etc. And because it is constituted by its relations, all of them, the self cannot be described entirely in terms of any one of its features, which is the reason that this cannot be a physicalist theory. The self is not a body, or any bodily organ, nor is it removed in any ontologically meaningful way from its contextual locations; it is fully and pluralistically natural.

In developing this naturalistic view of the self, Wallace draws significantly from the American naturalist and to a considerable extent pragmatist philosophical traditions, though the position and the argument are not designed as defenses of pragmatism or naturalism, and the reader is not expected to be familiar with those traditions in order to engage with the book. The figures who stand in the background are, most importantly, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Justus Buchler, though again, the book is not an explicit defense of any

of their philosophical legacies, at least not directly. They provide the conceptual underpinning that Wallace puts to use, and goes to considerable lengths to defend, in the theory's development.

The background on which Wallace draws is itself pluralistically naturalistic, and it is this philosophical tradition that more than any other (with the possible exception of some versions of Hegelianism) has developed and put to use the idea that entities are constituted by their relations. The emphasis on relations has also been extensive in feminist approaches to the self in recent decades, and Wallace explicitly draws on insights derived from feminist theory as well. She realizes, though, that in emphasizing the constitutive character of relations she is pushing feminist theory in new directions.

The Network Self, then, is the articulation, justification, and application of a theory according to which the self is relationally constituted and processive. In these respects, it is in some ways an unusual and original conception, and one that will be of value to philosophers interested in the related issues of the self, personhood, and personal identity. Those, indeed, are the people for whom the book is written. Though Wallace draws on the American naturalist and pragmatist traditions, her analyses are placed in the context of analytic literature on the subject, and in fact it is clear that the primary audience for the book is analytic philosophers. The rest of us can benefit from it a great deal, but the explication of the position and the arguments in support of it are expressed in the context of the analytic tradition.

This becomes clear in interesting ways. The most obvious is that Wallace goes to considerable lengths to clarify points that an analytic audience might be likely to misinterpret or to question, but that for an audience of pragmatists or pragmatic naturalists would need no clarification. The most persistent illustration of this is the way she discusses relational constitution. She makes the point repeatedly that the relations that constitute the self are not only social, but of many other sorts. Anyone steeped in the pragmatist or American, Columbia naturalist tradition would take this as a given. Another example is that she has to demonstrate fairly extensively that her under-

standing of relations is not susceptible to the criticisms commonly made of relational conceptions in the analytic literature. She makes the point, for example, that relations as she understands them are not necessarily fixed or atemporal, and she avoids the idea that relations are essential (necessary) or accidental (contingent), or that they are intrinsic or extrinsic, or pure or impure, or that relations cannot be ascribed to properties because properties are abstract universals. Again, a pragmatist or American naturalist would not worry these points.

So far this is all by way of introduction, and we should dwell a bit longer on the idea of constitutive relations that is so important for Wallace and for CNM. One of the reasons this conception of the self is unusual for analytic philosophers may be that the general conception of constitutive relations as it developed in the American tradition cuts across the more common approaches to mereology in analytic philosophy, and therefore analytic philosophers may find it odd. Mereological theories, which is to say theories about part-whole and part-part relations, have been a staple of analytic metaphysics for nearly a century, and in all that time the idea that a whole is constituted by its relations, and that any two or more terms in a relation are mutually constituted by that relation, has had very little development or support. To offer one illustration, a commonly accepted though not universally endorsed principle in mereological theory and formal ontology is that two distinct things cannot be parts of each other. Even if we assume a fairly restricted meaning and applicability of the term 'part', such that not all constitutive elements of a whole are necessarily parts, it is still the case that if the principle that two distinct things cannot be parts of one another holds, then an ontology of constitutive relations is, if not impossible, then at least much more difficult to accept than it would be without that principle. This may well be among the reasons that a theory in which the self is constituted relationally, and that relations are mutually constitutive, could be jarring to anyone steeped in analytic metaphysics. Consequently, Wallace must take

pains to explicate and justify her basic conception, a task in which she succeeds admirably.

CNM is both a descriptive and normative theory, and Wallace is careful to pursue both aspects. The descriptive aspect of the theory is its account of what a self is, which is to say a cumulative network of reciprocally constitutive relations. Chapters 1 through 4 develop and argue for this account of the self. Chapter 1 offers an overview of the issue and the theory; Chapter 2 develops the details of the relationally cumulative network that is the self; Chapter 3 accounts for how identity, a category critical for a coherent conception of the self, is understood in terms of the theory's rejection of an essentialist or substantive idea of the self; and Chapter 4 elaborates on the details of the theory through a discussion of typically counter-factual thought experiments that have been common in the analytic literature, specifically fusion and fission scenarios in which two or more selves might be 'fused' into one, or in which a self may be divided into more than one.

The approach is normative in the sense that one of the desirable implications of a network self is that it makes it possible to account for a range of practical aspects of the self, such as a first-person perspective, autonomy, and responsibility, both individual and collective, as well as continuity in the face of impairments. These normative features of the theory are aspects of a pragmatic argument in its favor, i.e. that it recommends itself because, among other reasons, it has these valuable practical ramifications.

It is one of the strengths of the theory is that it proceeds on the assumption that an adequate theory of the self must answer to both practical (normative) and 'metaphysical' (descriptive) criteria. The reason, basically, is that every self has agency, which means that any theory of the self must account for agency, and thereby for autonomy and responsibility of some sort; and every theory of the self, even one with an emphasis on agency and practicality, necessarily makes some metaphysical assumptions. As Wallace demonstrates, the descriptive,

metaphysical details of CNM are precisely what allow the theory to account for the practical aspects that a living self embodies.

The Metaphysics of CNM

Wallace says that her view was prompted by 1) certain developments in analytic metaphysics, specifically four-dimensionalism, and 2) feminist relational conceptions. The virtue of feminist theories for Wallace is that they take seriously the centrality of relations, social relations for the most part, in understanding the self. This is why from a feminist point of view, traditional philosophical conceptions of the self fail to do justice to women's experience, which is to say that they have not taken seriously the distinctive relational social contexts in which women find themselves and which go to considerable lengths in characterizing what it is to be a female self. Wallace appropriates these insights, but, as we have seen, expands them into a view in which all of any self's relations, not only the social, are constitutive of it.

A word about four-dimensionalism is in order because it may not be familiar to readers not versed in recent analytic literature. In offering us a conception of the self that is relational and cumulatively developing, Wallace is aware that she shares that conceptual terrain with other non-substantivist theories of the self. One that she finds interesting is four-dimensionalism, which holds, basically, that in the temporal dimension there are what are effectively 'stages' of the person, and these stages are more or less causally related to their subsequent stage. This conception avoids a substantivist notion of the self and recognizes its passage through time. Wallace argues, though, that four-dimensionalism does not and cannot provide a conception of identity that is sufficiently robust to handle the practical needs of a conception of the self. One of the motivations for the CNM for Wallace is to develop a view of the self that is more fluid than the fairly static conception that results from four-dimensionalism, and that thereby allows for a

more acceptable conceptions of identity through time and, as we will see below, responsibility. It is the cumulative character of the self, which accommodates the fact that selves, whole selves, prevail over time, that enables the preferable understanding of identity.

Wallace is careful to distinguish two senses of identity. One of them is the metaphysical sense of the term, in which identity refers to a formal relation of a certain kind. The second sense is that used when we speak of identity politics, or for example one's ethnic identity. The primary concern of the theory, especially in its descriptive moments, is identity in its metaphysical sense, though she makes the point that identity in the second sense is related to identity in the first in that the various 'identities' one may point to for a given person are among the relational contexts that provide the individual with identity in the first sense.

Wallace avoids common understandings of the self, or the person, in psychological terms, or in terms of consciousness or conscious states, or in strictly bodily terms. She wants to develop, rather, a coherent conception of the self and of identity that enables the various ways in which we appeal to and use the concept of the self, or the person, in ordinary life. Numerical identity and identity over time are understood in terms of unity, and what she calls "that-one-thing-ness" of any given self. The details, though she does not use the technical vocabulary, are drawn from the general ontology of ordinality, which is to say Buchler's general ontology, and its treatment of identity. She has the ordinal concepts in mind, but she uses, where she can, the terminology of the analytic debates in which she is engaged. For example, one of the ordinal concepts Wallace relies on is integrity, which indicates the unity and coherence of a complex of relations, in this case a self, and enables a notion of identity. The adequacy of the theory requires the capacity to describe the coherent unity of a relational self and maintain its identity through time. Wallace demonstrates that the necessary unity and identity can be sustained when we understand the self as cumula-

tively developing, so that for a given self the past is not simply causally related to, but is integrated as a constitutive relation into, subsequent moments in the self's cumulative process.

Wallace further clarifies the meaning and import of CNM by contrasting it with approaches to the self that have used various thought experiments in their analyses, primarily concerning fusion and fission. She rightly points out that thought experiments are of limited value in philosophical analyses because, we may say, they tend to beg relevant questions in the very structure of the experiments. If, for example, you design a thought experiment in order to find an essential trait of the self, you have already ruled out of court a view, like CNM, that does not posit such a trait. In some respects, too, it seems as if such thought experiments have little value other than to help us clarify our intuitions, which is useful but by itself does not help to settle any philosophical questions. Somewhat more sympathetically, we might say that the purpose of thought experiments is to test intuitions, though that raises its own set of questions. We are likely to think through a thought experiment in terms of our intuitions, so it is hard to see how such experiments can test them. But because such thought experiments are common in the relevant literature, Wallace goes to considerable lengths to address the more familiar of them; and she does so with admirable patience and thoughtfulness.

We will not take the time here to go into any of the details. Suffice it to say that there are many ways, generally fanciful and counter-factual, in which people have imagined two or more selves combined into one, or one self split into two or more. By exploring how CNM would handle such thought experiments Wallace further clarifies the details of the theory, which provides the opportunity to assert repeatedly that the critical point for understanding a person, and therefore for deciding how to handle such fusion and fission cases, is the status of the network that is the person. If, in any fusion cases, the initial network can be ascribed to the new being,

then the self is so situated; and for fission cases, if the network that constitutes the person initially survives whatever process to which it is subjected, then the self can be identified. If the network does not survive fusion or fission, then the self is not sustained. Perhaps a new self or selves will emerge in such cases, but the survival of the original requires the survival of the network.

The self, then, is a cumulative network of relations. Such a constitutively relational view allows Wallace to build the many relations of the self – social, but also material, cultural, historical, biological, and many others – into the self's identity. Moreover, because the identity of the network is sustained over time and thus the self is cumulatively constituted, the theory can successfully account for the critical practical aspects of the self. To this point Wallace has demonstrated that CNM is a coherent and plausible conception of the self. What comes next helps to establish the third pillar of a pragmatic argument, which is its usefulness and value.

The Practical Ramifications of CNM

Chapters 1-4 have worked out the relational conception of the person or self that is captured in CNM. In so far as it has done so through an engagement with prominent recent analytic accounts of the self, it has made a valuable contribution to the philosophical literature. The genuinely original analysis, though, begins from this point. In showing how a self *a la* CNM has a first-person perspective, autonomy, and responsibility, Wallace has developed this constitutive relational and processive conception of the self in ways that have not been accomplished before. We can begin the explication with a look at how she handles first-person perspective.

The relational self for CNM is understood as "a functional capacity for communication among self-perspectives." (115) Others have developed the idea of a multiple self, for example Freud, Mead, and even Plato, so in itself this is not new, though among these three figures it is only Mead who had a reasonably developed

relational conception. In fact, Wallace explicitly draws on Mead and his idea of the social self; she also draws on Josiah Royce for a conception of interpretation, and most crucially on Buchler and his concept of reflexive communication. Each has a relational conception of the self, and each to some extent works out ways that a relational self generates meaning. Wallace takes these background ideas in new and more fully ramified directions.

In its multiple traits, the self is to be understood as a community, where community means a common, or parallel, set of experiences among the members. So, for example, there is a community of opera lovers, or of subway riders, to offer examples that Wallace uses. Such 'experiential parallelism' is a condition of communication. This parallelism, moreover, prompts 'signifying activity' on the part of members in relation to the common object that enables the community. The signifying activity need not be uniform - there can be diverse meanings, disagreements, etc. But some signifying activity in the context of experiential parallelism is what enables community.

The self as community is understood as experiential parallelism among the various perspectives, or traits, that constitute the self, many of which are capable of serving as a perspective from which other traits, or other aspects of the world, may be engaged. The ongoing interaction among perspectives is what generates the unified self that persists through space and time. The 'I', then, is precisely this unified 'plurality of traits'.

Following Buchler in this respect, Wallace holds that the communication among the self's multiple perspectives is reflexive communication: "Experiences such as self-criticism, self-identification, self-discipline, self-representation, self-conflict, self-deception, are all species of reflexive communication." (125) In other words, the understanding of a relational self through reflexive communication is able to account for the range of first-person experiences that we have. The communication, symmetrical or asymmetrical, among the self's perspec-

tives is reflexive communication. In this highly general sense, communication is not necessarily reflective, conscious, and certainly not necessarily linguistic. Selves, and perspectives of a single unified self, engage one another in many ways that generate meaning. The process is not always smooth, and not "always felicitous or orderly." (135)

Reflexive communication is a broad notion, and in the generation of meaning it is not limited to linguistic assertions, or to giving reasons. It may consist of those activities, "But, it could also include day-dreaming, emotion modulation, warring with oneself, battling an addiction, experimenting with self-representations, simply exploring the meaning of something, say a painting or a piece of music, or pushing oneself to improve athletic performance." (137) Wallace does not say it here, though she does elsewhere, but she clearly wants to accommodate the breadth of human activity, in communication and experience generally, that Buchler was trying to express in his theory of judgment, where he distinguishes three forms of judgment, or active manipulation of one's environment - assertive, exhibitive, and active.

The critical point is that a relational self is fully capable of first-person perspective, and the way we can understand that is through the reflexive communication among the self's many perspectives or, more technically, among some of its ordinal locations and constituent traits. To this point Wallace has appropriated Mead and Buchler, primarily, and placed their understandings of the relational self within her broader CNM. When she turns to autonomy and responsibility, she shows how the relational and cumulatively processive self accounts for autonomy and responsibility, without which it would not be a workable theory.

Though acknowledging that some recent philosophical work has preferred 'agency' to 'autonomy', Wallace prefers to make the case for the latter. Those who have made a point of recognizing social influences on selves have understood autonomy as 'making one's own' the

social and cultural influences on the self. Because CNM is not a theory about social influences but about relational constitution, Wallace needs a more developed way to articulate and locate autonomy. In her hands, the self's autonomy is a form of reflexive communication, and more specifically it is "engaged in generating and acting on norms for self-guidance and self-rule." (144)

Autonomy, or self-rule/self-determination, means that in the process of reflexive communication, the self from one or more of its perspectives distances itself from one or more of the others; in the process, the self reflects on, evaluates, critiques, and generally assesses one or more perspectives of the self, or the self as a whole. The self thereby is able to develop normative and regulative principles for itself. In this way, relational constitution, including social and cultural influences, does not preclude self-rule, i.e. autonomy.

Wallace distinguishes between doing what one wants and self-rule. An example she uses is eating vegetables. If one likes eating vegetables and does so regularly, then one is typically doing what one wants. But this is not necessarily autonomy, because autonomy requires a self-generated norm to which one establishes commitment. There could be such a norm with respect to eating vegetables, in which case complying with it would be an illustration of a person acting autonomously. (149)

In the process of reflexive communication, a perspective of the self can become an object for the self, which in that respect is functioning as subject from one or more other perspectives. Thus the self can become an object for itself (as Mead made much of), and in doing so can reflect on itself. Such self-reflection can have a number of different results, including self-criticism, self-praise, etc. It is also the way that the self develops expectations for itself, as well as the norms, regulations, and rules it commits itself to in order to realize those aspirations. This is how autonomy works according to CNM. Though Wallace doesn't mention it, we might point out that this is also how the self achieves novelty and creates itself in the process of its experience. The

autonomy that we want to be able to accommodate in our conception of the self, as well as the fact of creativity and novelty in the self, are not at all impeded by the fact of relational constitution of the self and the many social, biological, cultural, and historical relations that constitute us. On the contrary, autonomy and self-development are enabled by that very relational constitution, a point that accounts for the value of CNM in practice. And it is worth remembering, as Wallace herself points out, that the self-assessment that occurs in reflexive communication need not be assertive. The assertive is not the only mode in which people judge; we also do so in exhibitive and active modes, and reflexive communication takes place in and through all three, depending on the case. (151) The generation of norms that accounts for autonomy works, she argues, in the same plurality of ways.

Some theories of the self require that there be some higher' or 'authoritative' aspect of the self in which lies responsibility and authority for norm generation. CNM rejects this approach, primarily because the perspectives that constitute the self are not themselves hierarchically ordered, unless with respect to a particular function. If my concern at a given point is with physical exercise, for example, then some perspectives of the self will be in a more authoritative position than others. In different contexts, however, the relative authority of any of the relevant perspectives could be differently ordered. There is for CNM no absolutely 'higher' or 'authoritative' aspect of the self.

Several other issues that warrant mention are discussed along the way, for example authenticity, and the pervasiveness of power, and Wallace shows how the CNM handles them. At one point Wallace takes up the question whether an individual can give oneself over to the authority of another and remain autonomous, for example by joining the military, or a strict religious order, or simply following certain religious/cultural expectations, or for that matter selling oneself into slavery or, along similar lines, a willing addiction. Such issues are of

course relevant for an adequate conception of the self and the centrality of autonomy, though they are not a problem because of any unique aspects of CNM. They are relevant issues for any conception of the self. In other words, the issue in such cases is not whether CNM is up to the task, but whether and to what extent autonomy is in fact central to our understanding of the self. CNM is flexible in these sorts of cases, allowing for the attribution of autonomy in some circumstances and not in others. In this regard it seems to answer well to our intuitions about such matters. For example, in some sorts of cases willing addiction can be an autonomous choice, while in other circumstances it would not be.

Interestingly, Wallace is prepared to grant the possibility that some people may be more or less autonomous than others, in the sense that some may have stronger capacities for the sort of reflexive communication and self-assessment that self-rule requires. This is an interesting point that deserves more consideration, largely because it bears directly on political theory and possibilities. Much of the Deweyan tradition, for example, rests the possibility of democracy on the ability of an electorate to exercise the method of intelligence in the handling of issues related to the polity. This is one of the reasons Dewey thought education to be so important. But if the capacity for autonomy is not more or less equally distributed, then there seem to be problems for Deweyan democratic theory. On the other hand, if Dewey was right that all people can be assumed to be educable, even if we do not all share the same skills in equal measure, then we presumably would be educable with respect to our capacities for self-rule and autonomy. One wonders what impact that might have on how CNM handles this sort of question.

The final topic that Wallace takes up is responsibility. The aspect of responsibility most under consideration here is responsibility as an identity-presupposing condition. Other aspects of responsibility, for example responsibility through time, and collective responsibility, are also pertinent. On Wallace's view, though it has some

virtues, the four-dimensionalist approach to the person has trouble establishing identity, for example, in ascribing criminal responsibility to a person, and therefore cannot adequately account for the sense of responsibility that we need in social, in this case legal, situations. The problem is that four-dimensionalism treats selves at separate times as 'person-stages', each of which is then causally related a subsequent stage to create a 'person-career'. CNM, in part because it treats the person at any given time as a cumulative process, can handle this better.

Responsibility in a temporal sense, i.e. forward as well as backward in time, is also better accounted for by the processive and cumulative nature of the self. It can assume responsibility for past actions because its past is a constituent of the self, and as a process, for which its possibilities at any given time are among its constitutive traits, it can project responsibility into the future.

Collective responsibility, similarly, is implied by CNM. The self is relational, and among its constitutive relations are its social relations. Moreover, the relations that constitute the self are mutually constitutive, so that one's social locations constitute to some degree the self, and the self constitutes to some degree its social locations. For example, by virtue of being a philosopher one is relationally constituted by the various meanings and implications of that trait. At the same time, those traits, i.e. the various meanings and implications of being a philosopher, are constituted by the self, indeed by the many selves that are related to it. In most respects, a single individual's relevance to the traits of being a philosopher are minimal, but they could be considerable. The same points could be made if we use one's neighborhood as an example, in which case one's relevance to the traits of the neighborhood may easily be greater. In both cases, though, the relational constitution is mutual. This fact enables, and perhaps in some cases implies, collective responsibility. (181-182)

Finally, Wallace devotes considerable time to a discussion of responsibility within the several thought-

experiments that she discussed earlier in the book. The details are many, and we will leave them aside. There are two important points, though. One is that the ascription of responsibility assumes ongoing identity, and identity is located in the network, not in any single trait or set of traits. Second, given that identity is in the network, responsibility can be located in or ascribed to the various forms of fission and fusion that she discusses, only if in any given case it is reasonable to claim that the network prevails as the same network, which is to say that identity is maintained through the process. If that can be reasonably claimed in any given case, then ascription of responsibility is at least possible, and whether it is appropriate or reasonable would depend on the details of the case.

Wallace has done a great service for those of us who are interested in the philosophical details of the conception of the self. With considerable rigor and admirable clarity, she has developed the idea of a cumulative, relational self in detail, and has demonstrated, convincingly in my opinion, the coherence of the idea, its plausibility, and its value. The analysis is a success on both its metaphysical and practical sides. Equally importantly, she has accomplished this within the contexts in which this sort of view is rarely developed, by which I mean the context of analytic discussions of the issue. Her command of the expansive literature is firm, and her treatment of it is sensitive and careful; she takes from it what she can, rejects what she cannot, and offers improvements when the theory provides them. For all of these reasons, this is a book that deserves a close reading by all those, regardless of one's philosophical background, who understand that an adequate conception of the self is important for anyone who is interested in human beings and how we engage our worlds.