Autonomy Revisited

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One of the core issues in medical ethics has been and still is autonomy, people's right to make their own self-regarding choices in situations where more than one option is available. Depending on the case, these choices may be influenced by personal life history, one's ethical and other values, and one's future expectancies. A professional soccer player may risk an operation, which for a less athletic individual would represent an unnecessary risk that might jeopardize her ability to even walk. Saying no to painkillers may sound irrational to those who do not see anything ennobling in avoidable suffering, and preferring homeopathic medicine to more evidence-based medicine may lead others to seriously doubt the logic of one's thinking. But although these situations may be difficult,[1] they seldom lead to an impasse. Even if serious value conflicts emerge in these patient–medical personnel encounters, they can be overcome by the fact that, in Western countries, honoring patients' autonomy has been widely accepted as part of medical professionalism.

The most serious disagreements about the meaning and value of autonomous decisionmaking arise on totally different levels. Sincere respect for "bedside autonomy" may hide attitudes that are strongly opposed to what full-bodied autonomy should mean. This is not only due to the value given to autonomous decisionmaking per se but to the extent people hold a perfectionist, or imperfectionist, view on autonomy and other ethically relevant values. Individual autonomy should not only be seen as a concept related to traditional patient-doctor confrontations but rather as a concept deriving its meaning and purpose from social and political philosophy where the principles of well-being, happiness, and justice define the nature and implications of autonomy itself.

To properly understand the meaning and role of autonomy and its connection to social life, it is of utmost importance to realize that our moral values cannot be fully separated from empirical reality, epistemological beliefs, and our personal identity but instead reflect our hierarchy of values, our personal preferences, and our views on good life and ideal society. The emphasis given to religious, aesthetic, economic, and social values has a bearing on what we see as ethically preferable, and it, therefore, also influences the choices we are ready to make as political agents, consumers, and active members of our societies. To understand the nature of our discord in moral issues and the ensuing inability to fruitfully discuss the disparities of our views, it is not enough to comprehend the rigidity and absoluteness of the views of those who claim to be cognizant of the eternal true values. We also need to try to analyze how and to what extent beliefs in ethical relativism and conservative enculturative conditioning are accurate and justifiable.

Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics (2004), **13**, 41–46. Printed in the USA.
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180104131083 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Individual Freedom and Autonomy

Liberal thinkers have usually defined freedom either as a lack of constraints or as an ability of individuals to decide for themselves what happens in their lives. Within the classical forms of liberalism, to say that people are free means primarily that they are not prevented from acting according to their plans, wishes, or desires. This definition, however, is problematic. First, individuals are not always free, even if they are not hindered from doing what they want to do. If somebody has locked me in a room, I am not, strictly speaking, free to leave the room, even if I have no wish to do so. Second, my wish to celebrate my two hundredth birthday cannot be fulfilled even if nobody tries to sabotage this wish of mine. The nonrestriction of options available may depend on the benevolence of others but may as well depend on simple nonexistence of these possibilities.

Restrictions of freedom can influence people by being present, in which case they are technically referred to as positive constraints, like physical obstacles and violent threats. But there are also elements of unfreedom, which influence individuals by their absence. These negative constraints include lack of resources. Those without adequate financial means cannot—in a society that does not provide its citizens with publicly funded healthcare—get themselves treated, no matter how vital this usually autonomous wish to be treated may be for their pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness.[2]

Both positive and negative constraints can be further divided into external and internal.[3] Prison walls, threats, and lack of money are all external obstacles, existing outside the mind-body continuums of human beings. Pains and obsessions are positive internal constraints that work by their presence, whereas moral weakness and lack of talent are negative internal constraints, which are based on the absence of certain desirable character traits in human beings.

Opponents of liberalism have often argued that there are internal constraints, which are in fact essential if we try to pursue our true, positive freedom.[4,5] According to them, a person whose high moral standards prevent her from inflicting harm on innocent human beings is not unfree but rather free in the most genuine and significant sense. The fact that she is aware of the basic requirements of social life, and respects them in her actions, makes her truly free. On the other hand, individuals who have not been able to learn and internalize these rules should be regarded as unfree.

But what does it mean to abandon the value of autonomy as nonrestriction of options and the capacity to make autonomous decisions? That would be to say, roughly, that autonomy and self-determination are not valuable in themselves because free choice and lack of constraints do not guarantee the good life that should be everyone's goal. There are at least three different lines of argument to this—all of them equally detrimental to the traditional liberal (Millean) view on individual autonomy.

Is Autonomy Possible in a Minimum State Liberalism?

The adherents of the minimum state doctrine usually fail to realize that their core idea—the protection of our negative rights—that they seem to consider clear and simple, is far from being so. It has been asked what these negative rights are, how we can recognize and define them, and whether they possibly

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consist of only one right—namely, a right to liberty.[6] And if negative rights should be reduced to a single right to liberty, are we able to define it? This question is especially vital because we cannot ignore the conflicts that arise when different kinds of liberties collide. A Nozickian kind of minimal state theory is particularly vulnerable to this criticism because he emphasizes, much more than his predecessors, the value of noneconomic liberties.[7]

Naturally, the presupposition of those in favor of the minimum state is that the only way to protect and maximize individual liberty is to restrict the state's role to a bare minimum. But is it really possible that personal freedom finds its finest forms and expressions in a society where you can rely only on yourself in the provision of necessary means for life? The protection of property rights surely benefits people's well-being in that the wealthier citizens have a wide range of options permitting them personal fulfillment. But what about the personal freedom and autonomy of those who—already unlucky in birth—are provided only with the barest means of survival and with an unsupportive background? The economic liberty, if fiercely protected by the state, may create conditions where the freedom and autonomy left to some is close to nil.

The classical Ayn Randian question—why should I suffer for the bad luck of others—can be replaced with the question: why should they suffer if we can help them without causing suffering to ourselves? Is it really possible to value liberty if, at the same time, we are not prepared to adopt any positive duties? It can, after all, be assumed that everyone agrees that the lack of self-sufficiency or lack of initiative are not necessarily self-chosen or self-produced. It is difficult to see how life without options could be seen as an acceptable result of policies that allegedly value liberty above all. If freedom and the value of autonomy are to be held as core elements of any liberal theory, moral importance should be given not only to negative freedom and positive acts but also to omissions and deliberate failures to act.

Autonomous choices become empty if and when there is nothing to choose from. I cannot really choose between vanilla and chocolate ice cream if I have never tasted either of them (or haven't tasted any ice cream!), and a poor African cannot make an autonomous choice whether to risk his life by drinking dirty water or not if no clean water is available. In the same spirit, what is the use of talking about autonomy if every time I try to make a self-regarding decision, I realize that its actualization is beyond my reach due to lack of funds?

Autonomy and the Requirement to Choose Well

In his book *Beyond the New Right*, John Gray set out to defend the conservative outlook on politics as a real alternative to both libertarianism and revisionist, egalitarian liberalism. With his arguments he wanted to show how, although market freedom and limited government form the necessary basis for a good society, one of the central tasks of any government is the protection of common values:

> Contrary to neo-liberalism, a conservative government has good reasons to concern itself with the well-being and virtue of its subjects, since if these are not promoted liberal civil society will decay and loyalty to the liberal state will tend to wane. Conservatives must

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> therefore resist the pressure for the political disestablishment of morality that is the common coinage of liberalism in both its libertarian and its revisionist egalitarian varieties.[8]

Rather surprisingly, this paternalistic view on people's values does not make him undermine the value of liberty. On the contrary, he seems to see it as an essential part of society: "[free market economy] rests upon the foundations of a common culture of liberty and has as its supports the institutions of a strong state."[9]

Is this view well founded? In his utopia, is there really place for individual liberty and autonomous choice, or could it instead be that combining economic freedom with commonly shared morality actually implies a world where personal freedom and autonomy are strictly limited to what the majority happens to consider appropriate?

The main objection against the nonconservative outlook seems to be directed toward the general optimism of the liberal tradition that reflects the ideas of the Enlightenment. Gray claims that, for example, in the United Kingdom (his example of conservative politics) it has always been believed that a universal and rationalist political philosophy can never be anything but an illusion. The liberal tendency to believe in a brighter future ought to be abandoned and the realities of life faced:

> Political life is not a project of world improvement, or the reconstitution of human institutions on the pattern of any ideal model, but instead something much humbler. The office of government is to palliate the natural and unavoidable evils of human life, and to refrain from adding to them. . . . We are not, each of us, as our liberal culture encourages us to imagine, a limitless reservoir of possibilities, for whom the past is an irrelevance and the future an empty horizon.[10]

Of course, it is true that we are not all empowered, autonomous, nearly perfect visionaries. But is it so that, in his opinion, those who want to cast an eye to the future, those who are optimistic by nature, and those who are ready to strive for a better world are all wrong? Is it correct to presume that all liberals want to dissociate themselves from the past? We may well understand and accept that our past and our traditions have molded us, but it does not mean that we should appreciate every angle of our past. If something traditional is worth appraisal, it should be so because of its content and meaning, not merely *because it happens* to be a tradition. To be *influenced* by the past is not to be *determined* by it. Full-hearted conservatism allows choosing among existing values and lifestyles but denies potential choices that cannot be seen to be in line with conservative thinking. The implication for instance in healthcare is that publicly funded treatment should not be extended to cases where the individual in question has herself, undermining the worthy values, engaged in activities that could possibly endanger her health.

According to most conservatives and communitarians, traditional social and religious demands made by one's community do not render individuals unfree but instead prevent them from harming themselves. Frivolous, whimsical choices may harm people directly and indirectly by weakening common values that secure them with a sense of togetherness, essential for human well-being. As John Kekes puts it, "if a good society is one that fosters the good lives of the

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individuals who live in it, then giving precedence to autonomy over authority cannot be right, since autonomous lives may be bad."[11]

One more diversion from traditional Millean view on autonomy is professed by relativists. They may be ready to admit the importance of autonomy for some people[12] but to deny it for others. For them, autonomy is deeply culture related and therefore cannot and should not be universalized. It may be that it is important for us to choose our profession, whom we want to marry, and what to believe because individual and personal freedom have been accentuated in our cultural heritage. Putting individual autonomy before traditional and social authorities is not necessarily conducive to happiness, especially among people who are accustomed to subordinating their own will and constructing their identity through hierarchical relations to others. According to this view, we are allowed to criticize our own traditions but not entitled to judge other cultures where Western emphasis on individual autonomy is seen as overrated.

Autonomy as a Threat to Common Values?

Like Romanticism was born as a reaction to Enlightenment and to its ideals of reason, progress, and freedom of individuals, so was so-called communitarianism born out of the critique directed to one of the basic tenets of liberalism—namely, individualism. What seemed to annoy the critics of the liberal tradition most was the liberal rejection of culturally determined values and the belief in rational moral agents who may form their lives with their voluntary choices. The question was not so much about whether people are really able to make their own choices without undue influence but rather about the presumption that people, in the first place, want to choose.

For community-oriented thinkers, choosing does not represent something valuable in itself but rather something that, at worst, may threaten the possibility of good lives. For instance, Joseph Raz, often seen as representing the middle ground between liberalism and communitarianism,[13] accords autonomy's validity as a Western idea but remarks that even for us only a certain kind of autonomy is commendable. Only those forms of autonomy that are based on the rationality of the agents' beliefs of the truth and goodness of what they try to achieve are worth pursuing. According to him, objective standards can be found for measuring the validity and goodness of both our aims and beliefs. As he puts it, "it is the goal of all political action to enable individuals to pursue valid conceptions of good and to discourage evil or empty ones."[14]

In this model, the goodness of our choices does not lie in their being voluntarily chosen but, instead, in the content and implications of these choices. The value of autonomous decisionmaking depends on what are seen as valid conceptions of the good. This, of course, means that the idea that choosing freely, in itself, could contribute to human flourishing is discarded. At worst, this could lead to invalid conceptions of good undermining both the freedom to choose and the good itself.

Many philosophers are nowadays ready to denounce both the strict, usually religion-based absolutism and the relativist positions often favored by anthropologists. The complexity of our world and the diversity of our value systems make it clear that no single comprehensive interpretation of morality is realistically possible. But does this mean that, even if we find certain values to be of

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importance to us, we are neither allowed nor required to argue for their importance to all humankind? Are we to adopt a culture-centered, relativist view on not only cultural but also ethical values? Is it wrong for us to criticize cultures where individual autonomy is a privilege of few—just because their culture is not ours?

What makes the situation even more complex is the fact that the existing differences are not just about whether certain acts or practices are right or wrong but, rather, whether these activities are morally relevant in the first place. An assumption might be that the sphere of morals is universal, even if its content varies. This view, however, disregards the fact that ethical thinking is seldom "purely" ethical but is strongly influenced by other kinds of ideas, such as how we perceive the world in general. Our moral values are intertwined in a web of social, political, aesthetic, religious, and other values.

But this, in itself, is not a risk to the society's existence because the opposite—a strong common morality—may pose a more serious danger, if not to the existence of that society at least to its ethical flourishing. This danger is detectable if and when there is no, or only little, criticism of prevailing moral codes and values. As Jonathan Glover has pointed out in his analysis of human aptitude to perform atrocities in the name of shared beliefs, unconditional acceptance of authoritarian values not only leads to a more or less brainless and manipulative existence but may seriously damage our ability to feel sympathy and compassion for others.[15] If moral integrity is to have any meaning, ethically attentive individuals should critically assess the merits and dismerits of predominant credos. Conservative and unquestioning acceptance of traditional values may turn moral life into a mechanical—even if bona fide—acceptance of either ruthless and inhuman morals or a hollow etiquette, a code of honor.[16]

Notes

1. Medical personnel may see the situation as a serious dilemma where, on one hand, they are supposed to offer the best possible treatment and, on the other, respect patients' autonomy even when they happen to choose something that in the professionals' eyes seems to be detrimental to their health.
2. See: Feinberg J. *Social Philosophy*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall; 1973:13–4.
3. See note 2, Feinberg 1973:13.
4. Berlin I. Two concepts of liberty. In: *Four Essays on Liberty*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1969.
5. Taylor C. What is wrong with negative liberty? In: Ryan A, ed. *The Idea of Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1979.
6. See, for instance: Gray J. *Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government, and the Common Environment*. London: Routledge; 1993:4.
7. See: Nozick R. *Anarchy State and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books; 1974.
8. See note 6, Gray 1993:50–1.
9. See note 6, Gray 1993:51.
10. See note 6, Gray 1993:47.
11. Kekes J. *A Case for Conservatism*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press; 1998:37.
12. Mostly, of course, to us Westerners.
13. Or he might also be called a liberal perfectionist.
14. Raz J. *Morality of Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1986:133.
15. Glover J. *A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. London: Jonathan Cape; 1999.
16. Nazi Germany is, of course, the prime example of the former, and prewar Japan of the latter.

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