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Freedom from Autonomy: An Essay on Accountability

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Abstract
Neo-Kantian philosophers see accountability as a key property of autonomy, or of social freedom more broadly. Autonomy, among those theorists, is, I contend, implicitly co-conceived with responsibility, producing a quasi-juridical conception of autonomy and a limiting notion of freedom. This article criticizes the connecting of freedom with accountability on a number of grounds. First, various conceptions of autonomy not only operate without a notion of accountability, but, in fact, would be impaired by an accountability requirement. Second, the neo-Kantians are unable to defend the freedom enhancing properties that are supposedly brought about by the giving of reasons for one's beliefs and actions. Third, the project of accountability is indifferent to personal outlooks, not because it takes a holistic perspective, but because of its interest in social convergence.

Keywords: accountability, answerability, authenticity, autonomy, individuality, neo-Kantianism, reasons, singularity

1. Introduction

This piece has the narrow objective of bringing attention to the peculiarity of the accountability requirement that, since Kant, has formed part of a number of conceptions of what it means to be free. I will suggest that accountability is incompatible with what seems to be an important aspect of freedom, namely, a personal outlook. By the latter I have in mind the ways in which each one of us experiences the world and our own mental lives thanks to an array of distinctive beliefs, memories and habits we bring to them. We would find the world a hostile place if it obliged us, for whatever reason, to relate to that outlook in a manner that would either curtail it or make it less familiar to us. Among the most

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obvious ways that could occur are coercion or censorship, and no doubt there are good reasons for both of those measures in many cases. A more philosophically based and less intimidatingly posed challenge to a personal outlook is accountability. That is a challenge because, as we find among some philosophical theorists, accountability is identified as a criterion of freedom. And it is operationalized by means of a supposed obligation to account for one's motivations and actions in ways that render them intelligible to others.

Accountability for actions is a function of law and morality whenever those actions intrude upon the peace of others: that is not the point at issue here. Where my enquiry lies is in the claim that freedom is in some sense attenuated until we have made ourselves accountable – or answerable more specifically, as I shall explain – for our beliefs and habits. What I will try to indicate is that the accountability requirement fails *both* to appreciate the particularity of how we experience the world *and* offers no explanation of how it is a freedom enhancing process. In addition to uncovering those difficulties I will propose that the accountability claim transports the mechanisms of responsibility, that are part of the legal and moral orders, into a space of experience where those mechanisms appear to be insensitive or irrelevant. A juridical perspective is imperial in the range of its application. I do not want to offer, even implicitly, an assessment of the merits of autonomy in general. My exclusive interest here is in tackling the claim, where it is found, that autonomy, or freedom in some determinable sense, requires accountability.

The words freedom and autonomy appear frequently in this essay, as does the notion of a personal outlook, with no accompanying systematic explication of their conceptual relations provided. That is because I do not think that such an explication is required in order to undertake the critical work intended here. The use of the term autonomy by some of the authors I refer to might just as easily be substituted with the word freedom. Hence whatever holds for one term holds for the other. (A more detailed consideration of their writings than is appropriate in this context would be likely to produce lines of demarcation between those terms and their cognates.) The idea of a personal outlook can likewise be characterized as a free or autonomous relationship with the world, depending on one's terminological preferences. Although there may be suggestive alignments of some of the ideas considered here with positive and negative conceptions of freedom – likewise freedom as self-determination or independence – they do not play a role in how the analysis was developed or unfolds.

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I will begin by setting out the pertinent background to the idea of accountability as a criterion of freedom. The next step will be to look at several contemporary articulations of that view. I shall then turn to a number of conceptions of autonomy that have no necessary dependence on the idea of answerability. The conclusion I shall arrive at is that answerability can be dispensed with within a range of theories that take freedom or independence and self-determination seriously. To put it another way, we can quite easily invoke the notion of human autonomy without having to associate it with answerability. That will highlight the distinctiveness of the conception of autonomy under review here. The final piece of analysis considers the purpose of answerability where it is not, officially at least, geared towards hammering out any kind of moral convergence. The concluding section develops the speculative interpretation of the answerability requirement as a juridicalization of freedom.

2. Background

The origins of the connection between accountability and the autonomous person are found in Kant's work.[1] Indeed, he develops theses, quite without precedent in the history of philosophy, either in intent or in scope, in order to ground a connection between the two. That connection is articulated within that part of his philosophy where the formidable issues of timelessness and noumenality feature. An analysis of Kant's metaphysics should be secondary, in my view, to considering the *practical-social intent* that he effectively supports metaphysically. What Kant wants to establish is a model of moral freedom which contains accountability as an essential feature. And it is essential because each one of us, as moral agents, has the capacity for reasons-based self-legislation – to 'satisfy the categorical command of morality is within everyone's power at all times' (*CPrR*, 5: 36)[2] – not a hierarchy of pathological and therefore non-rational preferences in which the would-be higher ones have authority over those arranged below them.

In practice that moral capacity involves a manipulation of reasons-based justifications that are equally intelligible and – in Kant's model – universally normative. Rational competence underpins the permission we members of a moral community are given to hold each other accountable. Ultimately – in Kant's and indeed in Schelling's successor view – each member of that community is accountable not only for their deeds, but also for the personal character that gives those deeds their determinate quality in the world.[3] Since character is freely determinable it is therefore subject to the moral law. Hence, as beings with an

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ineluctable capacity for free rationally directed causality, we are accountable for our actions or for the character which tends to produce those actions. Kant approaches that claim as follows:

> There are cases in which human beings, even with the same education that was profitable to others, yet show from childhood such early wickedness and progress in it so continuously into their adulthood that they are taken to be born villains and quite incapable of improvement as far as their cast of mind is concerned; and nevertheless they are so judged for what they do or leave undone that they are censured as guilty of their crimes; indeed, they themselves (the children) find these censures as well founded as if, despite the hopeless natural constitution of mind ascribed to them, they remained as accountable (*verantwortlich*) as any other human being. This could not happen if we did not suppose that whatever arises from one's choice (as every action intentionally performed undoubtedly does) has as its basis a free causality ... (*CPrR*, 5: 99–100)

The dynamic of Kant's general position here is of huge significance as social philosophy. It rests on a very particular claim about freedom, the freedom that underpins the moral law. There is a connection of a transcendental type in which, it transpires, the self-worth gained through the free exercise of morality – the moral law 'teaches the human being to feel his own dignity (*Würde*)' (*CPrR*, 5: 153) – is related to a duty to be accountable. In this respect responsibility, in effect, becomes an essential marker of freedom. As we can see from this short *précis*, Kant pursues a systematic relationship in what he understands to be freedom's involvement with accountability. What is of obvious significance here is the prioritization of those capacities that are distinctive to reasoning of a particular kind with the freedom that is called autonomy. It opposes a familiar view that, as Adrian Leverkühn would put it, 'freedom is of course another word for subjectivity' (Mann 1992: 193) (what I refer to, conventionally enough, as a personal outlook). It calls on each individual to justify themselves in terms that take the form of reasons with objective plausibility. And in that respect it gives weight, it seems to me, to the model of the individual whose motivations are always reducibly objective in the sense of being capable of shared intelligibility. It is part of an Enlightenment process within which, as Reinhart Koselleck has claimed, everything is 'sucked into the maelstrom of the public gaze' (Koselleck 1988: 115–16). The emergence of accountability as a criterion of freedom is consistent with that development in that it shares the

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tendency to reject in principle the non-publicly explicable space of personal outlooks. Accountability in this context, then, is an arm of the Enlightenment aspiration of bringing about convergence in the requisite forms of reason and practical action that are to be characteristic of the life of a supposedly rational society.

It should be emphasized that, just as I am not interested here in disputing the merits of autonomy in general, I do not wish to discredit the idea of accountability as some kind of nefarious social myth. Accountability is clearly a normative practice deeply embedded in communities where individuals are held to account for a broad range of actions under diverse kinds of causalities in a complex landscape of possible circumstances. The breadth of that range can challenge our non-law-based intuitions of what it is we are responsible for. Systems of accountability rest on notions of psychological states where intention is stretched – it can seem – to the limits of its plausibility in the sphere of law and justice. We also see, in the search for accountability, efforts to link outcomes that are harmful to human welfare with an ever-developing principle of *mens rea*. That is a theme that social philosophy could usefully explore, since our contemporary ideas of intention and responsibility have emerged with implicit reference to each other.

The Kantian model, as expressed in his moral theory, is clearly not formally concerned with the jurisprudential interest. The moral conception seems, indeed, to base itself within a socially de-contextualized mechanism of accountability that is immediately tied to the special freedom we are supposed to possess (irrespective of political environment). But it turns out to be attuned to the responsibility seeking dynamics of modern legal systems. This is not a new complaint. As Jacobi put it in the *Letter to Fichte* in 1799, '[f]or love of the secure progress of science you must, yea you cannot but, subject conscience (spirit most certain) to a living-death of rationality, *make it blindly legalistic*' (Jacobi 2009: 517; emphases added). The moral agent, officially the epitome of individual freedom, is accountable for actions in the manner of the legal subject. This means, in effect, that the moral agent is under an obligation to make their actions – and what motivates them – transparent and publicly assessable.

Rather disconcertingly this legalistic tendency can be witnessed in Frankfurt School social theory since the 1970s. It involves reframing freedom as a juridical process, and a correlative disinterest (compared with the critical theory that went before it) in internal life and singular

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experience. It is committed to the Kantian view that there is a vital relationship between autonomy and accountability. That commitment may not seem quite so evident on the surface. Jürgen Habermas' social philosophy, for instance, seems to lean toward a reformist programme of setting out conditions for individual self-realization, not hard legal responsibility. The programme is concerned with how the agent's capacity for the rational (i.e. autonomous) constitution of their own life might be enriched. Nevertheless Habermas construes non-pathological social development as a process that, among other things, instils a capacity for accountability, a capacity which contributes, eventually, to an ability to see oneself as a free agent: 'Because others attribute accountability to me, I gradually make myself into the one who I have become in living together with others' (Habermas 1992: 170).

I shall now begin the investigation of the supposed accountability-freedom link by looking specifically at the idea of 'answerability' as articulated by a number of philosophers within neo-Kantian social thought. The very idea of answerability gives expression to the linguistic act of accountability, to the offering of reasons and justifications. What is subject to scrutiny here is the idea that freedom is somehow not the proper or real thing unless it exists within a voluntary and shared framework of answerability requirements.

3. Varieties of Answerability

A number of contemporary theorists of autonomy stipulate that those who are autonomous are open and willing to be answerable to others for their beliefs. T. M. Scanlon, for example, writes:

> To regard himself as autonomous in the sense I have in mind a person must see himself as sovereign in deciding what to believe and in weighing competing reasons for action. He must apply to these tasks his own canons of rationality, and *must recognize the need to defend his beliefs and decisions* in accordance with these canons. (Scanlon 1972: 215, emphasis added)

Scanlon's notion of answerability is, in Kant's sense, expressly hypothetical: should I wish to take myself to be autonomous I ought to expect to be answerable for my actions. They are compulsorily subject to external examination, and I shall not attempt to hide them within a protected private sphere.

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Instances of what by contrast appear to be a constitutive conceptualization of the answerability thesis are found within the neo-Kantian tradition of social philosophy. These are cases which take the ideal of autonomy as a significant human end and adumbrate its various features, among which are obligations that are intrinsic to its function. Rainer Forst, for example, writes: 'Autonomous human beings formulate their moral and political judgments independently and critically evaluate them with the practice; at the same time, *they are also required to justify those judgments*' (Forst 2012: 7; emphasis added). And: 'Autonomous persons in this sense are accountable agents, accountable for themselves to both themselves and others; they can reasonably explain and justify their actions' (ibid., 129). Forst also speaks of the autonomous person's 'duties of justification', where justification must be undertaken in terms of 'adequate reasons' (ibid., 18). Unwillingness or perhaps inability to meet the requirement of offering reasons – regardless of the tortuous processes of deliberation that might give rise to courses of action now being questioned – renders a person functionally non-autonomous. Maeve Cooke develops a conception of 'ethical' autonomy by which she means 'the individual human being's freedom to form and pursue her conceptions of the good based on reasons she can call her own' (Cooke 2006: 17). But, at the same time, that ownership is also measured by its ability to meet the conditions of 'rational accountability and strong evaluation' (Cooke 2006: 142). Rational accountability involves 'the willingness and ability to take responsibility for one's actions, judgments, and self-interpretations in the sense of being able to explain and justify them to others, if need be' (Cooke 2006: 138).

But why should we consider answerability to be a necessary feature of freedom? Indeed, it may appear not only to be an intrusive requirement, but also one which cannot be defended as capable of improving the quality of a person's freedom. Furthermore, we can envisage situations where answerability would compromise freedom. Suppose only certain kinds of reasons qualify for answerability. That may be an implication of Forst's and others' notion of 'adequate reasons'. For example, Habermas controversially maintains that religious reasons must be reframed in secular terms in order to serve as acceptable reasons within the public sphere: 'only secular reasons count' (Habermas 2006: 8 *passim*). In such cases the reasons produced are inevitably imperfect translations into a language the norm does not naturally inhabit. To respond in non-native terms is to become answerable in ways that are distanced from the original conviction. This is a bureaucratic burden that does not allow a person to express what they really believe in the ways in

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which they believe it. Habermas is quite wrong if he thinks the burden is evened out because the 'requirement of translation must be conceived as a cooperative task' in which 'non-religious citizens must likewise participate' (Habermas 2006: 11). After all, it is not the beliefs of the latter group that need to be reimagined. It is not their personal outlook that is thought to be a barrier to full communication. Hence, the answerability produced through this process is, more accurately, an account rendered on others' terms. And then we have a conundrum: a person is most autonomous – i.e. involved in answerability – when they account for their convictions in reasons that are generally serviceable, even though they are not exactly the reasons that motivate the convictions: they are not directly grounded in the personal outlook but mediated by some other supposedly less arcane set of norms. This position empowers what Hegel calls objective spirit at the expense of that outlook without any concern about what the non-identity between the two means for what is thought to be neutral or objective.

Let me bring that drama into sharper view by citing the perspective of a perhaps otherwise problematic ally. In a letter to his wife, from the Château de Vincennes, the Marquis de Sade complained:

> You say that one cannot approve my mode of thought. What does that signify? Anyone who imagines he can prescribe a mode of thought to another must be quite out of his senses. My mode of thought is the result of my own reflections, it is part of my life, of my own nature. It is not in my power to alter it, and if it were in my power I should not do it. This mode of thought which you condemn is the only comfort of my life: it relieves all my sufferings in prison, it provides all my pleasure in this world; it means more to me than my own life. It is not my mode of thought that has caused my misfortunes, but the mode of thought of others.[4]

I take Sade here to be the voice of an individual for whom justification amounts to a renunciation of who he takes himself to be precisely because he sees his selfhood as a complex that is lost if it is forced to frame itself through generally shared reasons. And the consequence of this singularity is to exclude him from the general norms – 'the mode of thought of others' – whose supposed truths grant them governing authority. That is not to say his views could not be 'translated' in some sense, of course, but the motivations or experiences which give rise to what he expresses cannot be assumed to be available to others. And that is because understanding another person's point of view is obviously not the same thing as being

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motivated by it, whereas the person themselves cannot usually find any distinction between their point of view and what motivates them: they are seamlessly related. This may appear to invoke a special space of privacy that Wittgenstein's thesis effectively undermines. However, Sade's claim is not a positive 'ontological' one, but a negative conclusion drawn from the experience of the gaps within interpersonal understanding, and a consequent scepticism about the possibility of being comprehensible to others. The Habermasian rule of public participation is methodologically incompatible with sensitivity to this possibility. By contrast that rule reveals itself as a requirement within the system of accountability conducted with a delineated currency (i.e. reasons of a certain kind). And, notably, fulfilment of that rule does not in any evident sense increase the individual's freedom. Rather the rule is a type of social power which humiliates practices of self-understanding which cannot conform to it.

4. Autonomy without Answerability

In this section I shall briefly note four familiar conceptions of autonomy which explain how freedom works without any reference to duties, or the like, of answerability. Looking at those conceptions should help us to appreciate the very specific and unique features of that version of autonomy for which answerability is identified as an essential property.

4.1 Bare Institutionally Determined Autonomy

Modern democratic societies place their citizens within a number of institutions in which they are offered a set of options by those who identifiably organize those institutions. Individuals may choose from among those options as they see fit. No answerability for their preferences can be demanded by the institution that offers the choices. Indeed, answerability annihilates the very so-named autonomy generated by the conditions of those institutions. This suggests that there are two aspects of autonomy in this very particular context: first, the licence to choose as one pleases and without explanation and, second, protection from answerability. Autonomy here, in short, is both the act and the space within which that act takes place.

Examples of bare institutionally determined autonomy are patient autonomy and voter freedom in democratic political elections. In both cases the choosing individuals cannot be asked by the institution within which the choosing takes place to explain themselves.[5] Indeed in the latter case the enforced secrecy of the ballot box explicitly protects the individual from answerability. In these two examples choices are circumscribed: some people may, for motives best known to themselves, refuse consent

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to a sensible surgical procedure, but they cannot instruct their doctors to carry out an alternative course of treatment of their own devising. Voters might express a preference for one or several candidates or none, but they cannot usually select a candidate whose name is not mandated by the electoral system.

Each of these forms of autonomous choosing can have implications for others. A parent's premature death thanks to a mercurial or obscurely grounded refusal of promising treatment may leave dependent others in a difficult situation. Voting for a party or candidate with extreme economic or social policies may, if a sufficient number share that preference, lead to chaos of some kind. Those who are adversely affected by new policies will likely feel a moral right – so to speak – to an explanation for what the majority electors have done. They may or may not give it. But what is certainly the case is that those who govern the institutions within which the choices are made have no right – nor can they grant it to others – to insist on voters defending themselves for their choices, regardless of where those choices lead. Again, then, bare institutional autonomy contains the two elements of unimpaired – though circumscribed – choosing and protection from answerability demands.

4.2 Autonomy as Freedom from Disadvantaging Influence

A further sense of autonomy sees autonomy – in effect – as what you have when your decisions are your own in that they are not explicable as the effects of external influence. This thesis hinges on a notoriously hard to draw demarcation between what is internal – i.e. properly mine – and what is external, i.e. foisted on me without my knowing it. Ordinary cases of deception have been suggested – by so-called 'adaptive preference formation' theories (cf. Colburn 2011) – as the paradigm case of operating, disadvantageously, on external influence. That suggestion is implicitly committed to the otherwise uncompromised nature of genuine internal preferring or choosing. The complexity of human psychology, one might think, does not comfortably support that implication.

Let us, though, assume that the general thesis is viable and that individuals are impaired in their autonomy when their beliefs are not, in the sense required by the theory, their own. In what way would the answerability criterion help establish the autonomy or non-autonomy status of the individuals under review? According to the answerability criterion individuals are demonstrably autonomous only if accepting

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the duty of justification. It seems, though, that this device cannot illuminate the case of those whose beliefs are – to use the jargon – 'heteronomous'.

Consider the following situations. If I have been subjected to an intensive indoctrination in the most self-abnegating religion and am asked to defend my views it is far from unimaginable that I might do so passionately and articulately. Likewise with ideological formations. Indeed that might actually be the truth of me – the author of this article – that I am the unwitting product of my professional environment or family circumstances, but I think I can give you reasons for my beliefs, reasons you would not accept as genuinely my own. Hence the question of whether I am autonomous might seem to be an ongoing one, regardless of what my capacity for self-justification can reveal. Similarly, if I am brainwashed by advertising I can probably, nevertheless, defend my consumer goods choices. You may regard my reasons as mere rationalizations of processes I am too naïve to see through, but what cannot be denied is a willingness on my part to answer, explain and justify my choices.

What I want to draw from these two cases is that a prevalent marker of autonomy (one I do not actually see as philosophically defensible), namely, that our reasons should not be external, is not ascertained on evidence supplied by acts of self-justification. If we believe that our rationalizations are potentially nothing more than expressions of commitments we have antecedently fallen into then answerability has no constitutive role in determining the presence of autonomy. The question of autonomy, in other words, in this model is settled by a third-party interpretation of my commitments, and answerability is a mere side-show. (The case of false consciousness as the loss of autonomy is clearly relevant here.)

4.3 Autonomy as Authenticity

Some philosophers detect a natural conceptual alignment between the ideals of authenticity and autonomy. If, as the thought goes, the motivating desires upon which we act are rooted in what is speculatively thought to be our full identity, and not merely our moral or legal persons, we are living authentically. From the authenticity point of view some versions of autonomy may be impairing if they repressively orient us towards duties that in some respect pull against us. That view was first formulated by those contemporaries of Kant who rejected the exclusion of feeling as a criterion of what is fundamentally important to us. But authenticity can be thought of as a 'genuine autonomy', in contrast to autonomy

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conceived as subordination to a reasons-based self-legislation (cf. Velleman 2006: 8). The ideals of autonomy, in other words, may be met by being true to ourselves, as authenticity would have it. The absence of authenticity can be characterized as a lack of autonomy since the inauthentic person is supposedly beholden only to the opinion of others or the social conventions they are too weak to bring into question. The 'failure to be motivated from within' that person's 'true self' makes them 'inauthentic' (Velleman 2006: 338). Such an individual is somehow false, whether by temperament or by calculation. Whilst only a few theorists formally synthesize the concepts of authenticity and autonomy it is clear that informally many others assume something like an authenticity-based idea of autonomy as the model of a free and fulfilling life.

The answerability criterion seems peculiarly inappropriate to this popular variety of autonomy. We might suggest that an authentic life might be harmed by acquiescing with the duty of justification. First, I would be conceding – perhaps even ceding – a right to others to query my sense of who I believe I really am since my values are, for the ideally authentic person, an expression of who I really take myself to be. That is not to deny that there may sometimes be a productive outcome in engaging with, as Cooke puts it, 'hermeneutic openness to rival normative conceptions' with 'the possibility of learning and personal transformation through dialogical encounters' (Cooke 2004: 106). One may take the view that that process can only deepen my real sense of who I am, given that the conversational context requires me to explain it to myself as I explain it to others. It may seem, then, that a constant openness to challenge is a burden worth bearing should it occasionally allow me to better articulate where I have invested my freedom and why that investment is something I wish to protect. But there is no reason to believe, equally, that what I take myself to be can be sympathetically elucidated through the enquiries of others with quite differing personal outlooks or general conceptions of what is good or right. It is consistent with a commitment to authenticity to regard the dialogical process as futile, at best. Second, I would be signing up to the hypothesis that self-understanding can be reduced to what is intelligible within what is often hopefully called the 'shared space of reasons'. A radical conception of authenticity, by contrast, will not want to exclude from the beginning the possibility that the 'true self' remains recognizable to itself only as a singularity. That conception, then, does not accept the thesis that the shared space of reasons necessarily excavates every dimension of our experience by reaching into a space of motivations which will make

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it transparent or intelligible and meaningful to others in the same way that it is to the self in question.

4.4 Autonomy as Self-Reliance

Self-reliance is often regarded as a feature – if not the central property – of autonomy. It is interconnected with a set of dispositions, such as self-trust and self-regard. These are 'emergent properties of a dynamic process in which individuals come to experience themselves as having a certain status, be it as an object of concern, a responsible agent, a valued contributor to shared projects, or what have you' (Anderson and Honneth 2005: 131). A significant part of early education is devoted to inculcating self-reliance as the basis of a capacity for later autonomy. In socio-political analysis lack of self-reliance – or one of the related dispositions – is a familiar explanation when autonomy is thought to be absent in individuals with certain group memberships. These are individuals who have never quite trusted themselves with their own ideals or projects. Typically these individuals belong to a group once overtly deprived of formal political agency. But even in the absence of oppressive laws those group-identified individuals carry forward a personal reticence with regard to acting on their own intuitions. Ingrained assumptions about the supposed superiority of a once formally privileged group continue to assert themselves. There are lots of quasi-psychological elements in play here: the capacity to trust oneself – that one is likely to be right – with decisions about what to do; a willingness to stick with a decision and not habitually collapse by reverting to others or old ways; being able to realize and not be overwhelmed by the fact that sometimes one is quite alone, and that matters of personal importance cannot be well determined by others.

We might think that the answerability criterion here would certainly root out those who are anxiously reliant on the values of others. Of course, a perfectly plausible reply to an external enquiry could be that one follows others since they are obviously better judges of things. No plausible images of autonomy would, though, be embodied in that reply. Self-abnegation and self-determination have yet to be aligned. Indeed, the very value 'autonomy' – outside its scholastic environment – is arguably designed to oppose something very close to this idea of self-abnegating dependence. Even so it is not clear that answerability can help separate dependence from independence since individuals of both parties can offer reasons for their beliefs. Tacit admission of self-abnegation ('I rely on others to tell me what I should do') can still take the form of reasons, albeit reasons many would find unfortunate. An answer to the question

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of why one is dependent, in other words, serves no constitutive role in determining a person's autonomy, a role it seems to have when answerability is a criterion. And what, on the other hand, of the heroes of self-reliance? Here, as with the authentic case, it is a contingent matter as to whether the self-reliantly autonomous person cares to answer for their beliefs. There may be heuristic advantage in accepting the challenge of answerability: an opportunity for self-explication that might sometimes be helpful when considering one's next big step. Further, if one really enjoyed self-reliance answerability would hold no fear. In essence, then, willingness to submit oneself to answerability reveals nothing of the quality of that individual's self-reliance. Their answers may, indeed, be informative. But the criterion of answerability itself would be met even where the answer indicated that the individual was void of much sense of their own possible agency in the ongoing development of their lives.

5. Answerability as Performance?

What the brief examination of familiar conceptions of autonomy points to, I want to propose, is that answerability is a criterion of freedom only where freedom is captive to the specific social end of mutual accountability.[6] And, furthermore, answerability in this way is a practice which is necessarily formally circumscribed by design. That means that obligating accountability in this very form – on the basis that accountability is a criterion of freedom – necessarily reduces freedom to that form. There are versions of autonomy that, as we have seen, articulate certain principles (each of them potentially controversial in themselves) that are independent of accountability considerations. What type of autonomy can, then, be defended as necessarily accountability demanding? We can capture that type as *social autonomy* since its primary interest is the individual within a social environment, effective both in their reasons guided actions and willing to be answerable to others for those actions.

A key concern of neo-Kantian social philosophy has been to theorize ways in which individuals can – in a transformed social space – take full possession of their circumstances, be more than citizens with bare rights, but be active and reflective agents in the negotiation of their lives within the social environment. These are the ideals of 'a nonstigmatized, fully participating life' (Forst 2012: 136). Those with social autonomy, in that sense, move among others with a secure capacity to know why they act as they do on the basis of beliefs they have somehow come to confirm as independently their own. However, they are also self-conscious actors within a set of normative expectations. Now a concern with social

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autonomy might seem to be an arguable natural extension of the axiomatic democratic interest in bare political autonomy. We can see why a political entity that is alive to the culture, as it were, of democracy and not merely the formalities of participation would see this as part of its business. It is often proposed that an exclusively formally oriented consideration of democratic practice – mere voting, mere rights and entitlements – would be blind to the numerous ways that individuals or groups of individuals in particular may enter democratic deliberation with impaired senses of their possible agency. They therefore implicitly abjure power-making decisions or, worse, perhaps go with arrangements that are not in their best interests. Legal freedoms are simply one condition for social autonomy, guaranteeing a space where no one is coerced by the state or by other individuals. Intellectual and emotional coercion is harder to regulate. Where that coercion exists – even if it is in the form of biases and not expressed diminutions – the individuals targeted will have a weakened authorship over their lives. This – the idea holds – is a state of deficient autonomy.

Social autonomy, defined as an expanded capacity for democratic participation, is hardly troubling. The problem however is when social autonomy is construed as a kind of public object, which is what – by other names – we have seen among several practitioners in the neo-Kantian tradition. That, as I have been maintaining in various ways so far, places the very idea of freedom in tension with the peculiarities of a personal outlook. The agent who enjoys social autonomy in this sense is not simply an intelligent actor within a complex society. Rather, such an agent – it turns out – will never regard their motivating values, for example, or their distinctive way of looking at the world as a private possession. The very things that move them, instead, will be consciously framed in such ways as to make them compatible with answerability requirements. As Cooke has described it,

> autonomy entails rational accountability: calling reasons one's own amounts to an acceptance of the responsibility to give reasons for one's judgments and actions to others, if necessary. On this account, reasons are not *owned* by the self but *owed* to others; moreover, they are not *protected from* the critical gaze of others but *opened up* to their critical judgments. (Cooke 2006: 141–2)

With this type of prospectus we are provided with a vision of the socially autonomous individual as a contented citizen of the republic of reasons.

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Such a citizen would supposedly see their motivating beliefs as reasons. And since, the theory claims, reasons are never private, they are not owned like private property where no trespassing is allowed. To think otherwise is to promote 'possessive individualism' (Cooke 2006: 142 *passim*). Motivating beliefs are therefore constitutively public and hence available to those who choose to examine them: in examining them they necessarily challenge us since we claim stewardship over those reasons for so long as they are rationally demonstrable as effective and appropriate for us. The very notion of the public nature of reasons, though, is not enough to explain why we might be willing to engage in answerability. A certain kind of philosophical explanation about the meaning of 'a reason' is not inherently a practical one. And that, once again, suggests that if we are to understand what moves the theory of answerability we will have to look to the sense of the social world it is implicitly there to serve.

With that world we have permission to regard ourselves as properly free once we are engaged in the public exercise of the giving and taking of reasons. Is that exercise an end in itself or does it have an external end for which it is the instrument? If there is no assumption that that exercise will lead to any variety of objectivity or 'truth' it is then enough that the process be undertaken or performed. Hence, the giving and taking of reasons is not a contribution to constructing a shared ethical whole: it is, rather what it simply is, an exercise in the giving and taking of reasons itself. It is life as a philosophical seminar where participation is a virtue. Should we, though, revert to a classical Kantian view (i.e. universalism etc.) we would then suborn performativity to the task of getting our values into the correct order, with the help of others whose promptings initiate the process of gaining a final view on what we should do. The idea of convergence or end point is obviously controversial and sharply at odds with the manifest intractabilities of our social world (no doubt, in part, thanks to the plurality of personal outlooks it contains). Perhaps public acts of normatively oriented reasoning take an Enlightenment view of themselves, believing they are part of the ongoing construction of an overarching consensus, not least where claims about truth are made. Again, though, this hardly does justice to the complexity of a world where ferocious ideological and interpersonal differences give politics its ceaseless energy. Without hopes for convergence, consensus or truth, performance is exhausted in demonstrating to others, and to ourselves individually, that we are willing participants in the game of the giving and taking of reasons. In short,

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answerability affords the rational agent the opportunity to allow others to bear witness to that agent's willingness to reason.

It is evident, though, that performance contains no clear freedom enhancing dimension. And it is empty unless we assume that it will lead to convergence, a shared position. Perhaps that explains a hedging tendency that is repeated across answerability theories. Take Forst's claim, for example, that the 'ethical person as an autonomous individual with his or her "strong evaluations" and "final ends" remains the decisive authority in ethical questions that refer to his or her life, even though these evaluations are constitutively oriented toward others' (Forst 2012: 16). Or Cooke: 'Rational accountability is an interpretation of what it means for the human subject to be able to call her reasons her own. It shifts the emphasis from ownership of reasons to responsibility for them' (Cooke 2006: 138). But what is the purpose of evaluations that are 'constitutively oriented towards others' if others, for instance, wholly reject them? The agent, in this model, has performed the role of the strong evaluator, but their viewpoint does not converge with others' (unless convergence is sufficiently achieved by playing within the rules of adequacy).

Does autonomy then consist, among other things, in a willingness to give reasons, regardless of whether they are persuasive? This seems to be a possibility within the theories we have examined, but the process of answerability cannot be wholly without purpose. It, at the very least, expects the individual to relate to their beliefs, motivating commitments, etc., in ways that are socially oriented, even if ineffectively so. Structurally it is an attenuated Kantianism: there is the legacy of the rational self-legislator, but without the end of moral objectivity. As a consequence it amounts to a performative rationality (required by others to whom it is in some way 'owed') which has no necessary connection with a life lived happily on terms that would make little sense to others. But it effectively denies the quality of freedom to modes of experience not based on that exercise.

6. Conclusions

At this point I hope I have given some substance to the case that the answerability criterion has its special purchase within a view of freedom that is socialized in a quite specific way. Viable notions of autonomy or freedom, appear, as we have seen, to be quite conceivable without it. To question why the answerability criterion should be given a constitutive role in how we understand our freedom is not to deny that reason plays

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a part in how we lead our lives. I am not sure what that part actually is, though. Again, it seems important to remind ourselves that the peculiar norms of academic debate – hardly transparent themselves – are not a serviceable model for social actors. What the answerability criterion involves uniquely is the role of others in obligating a defence of our reasons within rules of adequacy. Self-understanding – the personal viewpoint – is drawn into an institutional practice that is structurally alien to it. The intersubjective imperative arbitrates freedom with the presumption of autonomy as a system based on common acceptance of reasons of a type.

What gives rise to that presumption is not entirely obscure, I submit. Namely, autonomy is co-conceived alongside responsibility. Indeed, they mutually support each other. Answerability – and accountability more broadly – is in its nature a property of responsibility, and only through philosophical artifice is it one of freedom. Likewise, the purchase of the ideal of responsibility depends on ideas of human competences (such as accountability). Under examination, then, answerable autonomy presents itself as a social-philosophical analogue of the juridical self that is constitutively answerable to the institutions of law. The domain of legal responsibility may contain no thematic interest in freedom – in contrast with the ideals of autonomy – except in so far as it is relevant to the so-called 'control condition'. But that is a technical matter, focused simply on psychological capacities. Once that condition is in place answerability can be demanded: that demand is not to test or affirm the quality of freedom of the individual but their possible responsibility for specific actions. Within answerability-autonomy the question is the broader one of whether a person is responsible for themselves such as to qualify as steady actors of the sort required by some vision of a rational society. Hence what the two stories – the criminal and the social-autonomous – share is a notion that individuals by virtue of some quasi-normative status, as responsible or autonomous beings, belong to an institution of others who, with relevant authority, have the right to seek justifications of each other. The 'right of reason' – or the answerability demand – is a translation of the system of legal accountability into the broader sphere of action.

Social autonomy might be thought of as a special enabling competence to act with insight into our commitments, into their source and their value to us. When we think of it in light of the answerability demand, however, it has a tendency – within the claims about autonomy I have been examining – to lose what it seems to promise. What matters is a capacity

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for self-justification according to institutional norms. We might imagine a new community of beings who sign up to the answerability criterion on some heroic Millian basis, blithe to personal psychological costs. I take it here, though, that answerability theories develop conceptions of autonomy that they believe take individuals seriously as individuals. What this article has tried to show is that the answerability demand works naturally against that objective.[7]

Notes

1 Now the German and English languages, as we plainly know, offer conceptually similar perspectives on accountability. To be *verantwortlich* is to be both answerable and responsible. And it is implied in the notion of being 'responsible' that we must somehow give an account of ourselves. Hence responsibility must entail more than being the identifiable cause of something happening since it consists of a rational capacity to explain why we chose to make a cause of ourselves.

2 Parenthetical references to Kant's writings give the volume and page number(s) of the Royal Prussian Academy edition (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*), which are included in the margins of the translations. The English translation is from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. I use the following abbreviation: *CPrR* = *Critique of Practical Reason* (in Kant 1996: 139–271).

3 I set out the case of Schelling in O'Connor 2013.

4 That passage is quoted by Peter Weiss in a note to the text of his play, *Marat/Sade* (Weiss 1965: 114).

5 An exception, as Fabian Freyenhagen has pointed out to me, is when individuals, operating within those institutions, appear to be manifesting a lack of mental capacity. In that case, some kind of answerability is required in order to determine whether the individuals concerned are competent to make decisions without the assistance of others.

6 The over-socialization of freedom is a trait of contemporary social philosophy, it seems to me, in both its neo-Kantian and neo-Hegelian forms. See O'Connor 2015.

7 I am grateful to Maeve Cooke, Fabian Freyenhagen, John McGuire, Alastair Morgan and Howard Williams for forceful comments on an earlier version of this article. My responses may not go far enough for them, but I am sure that their challenges led me to a stronger articulation of my position.

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