

Autonomy as a Positive Value – Some Conceptual Prerequisites

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1. The context

Autonomy is considered to be a central value in ethical theory. Autonomy has generally been characterized as self-government or self-determination: to be autonomous or to live an autonomous life is to live a life in accordance with one's own conception of a good life, to live in accordance with one's own values or basic wishes or to realize one's own important projects or something like that. This has sometimes been considered to be of value in itself.

However, traditionally autonomy has not been considered as a value to maximize (as hedonistic utilitarians consider happiness), but as something that gives rise to negative rights or side-restrictions for how we are allowed to treat each other. If an individual is adult and competent to make decisions, other individuals should not prevent that individual from making decisions and act upon them, at least if she does not violate the rights of others (as Locke thought) or inflict damage on someone else (as Mill thought). According to this line of reasoning, we thus have a duty (at least of a prima facie-kind) not to restrict the autonomy of others. This, however, does not imply any obligation to help others to be more autonomous or live more autonomous lives. In other words, we have a moral obligation to respect autonomy but not necessarily to promote it.

I would say that this way to think of autonomy is the predominant one, at least in liberal tradition and biomedical ethics. In biomedical ethics, the right to have one's decisions respected is often claimed. This has been taken as the ground for not being manipulated or coerced to accept a medical treatment. Instead, the patient has a right to know what the treatment is about and a right to accept it or reject it. This is well in line with the idea of autonomy as something that is the foundation of rights or as something that ought to be respected.

However, recently it has become more common to defend various medical practices with reference to autonomy. Autonomy is then conceived as an aim to achieve or a value to promote. Let me give one example, namely presymptomatic genetic testing. Presymptomatic genetic testing is the testing of

a disease that has not yet emerged. Thus, the test does not reveal disease, but the future outbreak or risk for outbreak of disease due to one's genes. For some diseases that are tested in this way, there is no medical cure or palliation to be offered. One such disease is Huntington's disease. It is a genetic disease that is monogenetic and dominant, which, very simplified, means that you are guaranteed to get the disease if you are a carrier of the gene (unless you die before symptoms emerge). The disease has its onset in the forties and has roughly the same symptoms as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. It usually results in death ten to fifteen years after the first symptoms. There is no cure or palliation for this disease. Traditional goals for health care have otherwise been to cure or palliate, that is, health or well-being or something like that. What is, then, the justification for performing genetic testing on this disease?

The answer to this from clinical geneticists and others has very often been autonomy – if individuals possess the knowledge that they (probably) will get sick, they are in a better position to plan their lives in accordance with their own basic wishes. This line of reasoning has also been used to justify offering, for instance, assisted reproductive techniques.

In this context, it is obvious that autonomy is not conceived just as something that ought to be respected. Instead, autonomy is conceived of as a goal to be achieved or as a value to be promoted. This value is then used to argue in favour of introducing a medical practice.

Surprisingly little has been said on the idea of autonomy as a value to promote, that is, as a positive value. How is one to interpret autonomy in order to account for this idea? What kind of value is autonomy and why is it valuable? I will not argue why autonomy is valuable. I will neither say anything about whether autonomy is an instrumental value or a value in itself. Instead, I will try to outline a conception of autonomy that can be used to formulate different ideals of autonomy that takes autonomy to be a positive value. Thus, I presuppose a

rough distinction between the conception of autonomy, which says what autonomy is, and various ideals of autonomy, that says what kind of autonomy we ought to promote, when and why. Eventually, I will propose two possible ideals that views autonomy as a positive value that can, and maybe should, be promoted. First conception, then ideal.

2. General Characterization

To start with, I want to return to the general characteristic of autonomy I gave earlier. To be autonomous is to govern oneself or to decide one's own way. To live autonomously is then to live in accordance with one's basic desires or values. With basic desires, I mean intrinsical as opposed to instrumental desires, that is, the object of the desire is desired for its own sake. There is two ways to be less than fully autonomous according to this general characterisation

- if one does not or cannot live the life one has chosen to live
- if one does not or cannot chose the life one lives.

From this it should be obvious that autonomy is a matter of degrees: a person can more or less lead the life he has chosen and more or less choose how to live. Against this background I will depart from the following minimal definition of autonomy (a definition of which I am not the inventor). To be autonomous in a situation is at least to do that what one has decided to do, because one has decided to it and to decide to do what one wills, because one wills it. Thus, a necessary condition for autonomy is that the will causes the decision and the decision causes the action. Here three components are discernable:

- (i) will (desire, value)
- (ii) decision
- (iii) action

How autonomous a person is, is determined by all these components and all these components can vary in degree.

3. The Three Components of the Conception

Firstly, the will one acts from can be more or less authentic. Generally speaking, an authentic desire is a self-determined desire. How this should be taken more precisely is less than clear. However, a useful conception of autonomy should not presuppose metaphysically extravagant ideas, such as wills emanating from a noumenal self or desires created from a “true I”, free from social and other external influences.

However, an authentic individual should be able to critically evaluate the basis from which she makes her decision. In other words, a more reasonable account of authenticity has some idea of rationality as its point of departure. One such idea is that an authentic desire can be upheld in light of knowledge about oneself and the desire. More specifically, there is nothing with the forming of the desire that would make the agent inclined to abandon it. The agent can identify herself with the desire, willingly acknowledge that she has it and will not abandon it just because she learns new things about herself. This idea connects the thought of identification and rationality as ideas of authenticity. Unauthentic desires are desires that we would be inclined to abandon if we were to find out why we had them. This is not to demand that a person has to be the origin of her own desires, an idea that is implausible and perhaps even incoherent.

The following empirical hypothesis seems to be plausible. Desires that are a result of indoctrination, brainwashing, hypnosis, self-deception, fear, phobias and other psychological pathologies are typically such that we would be inclined to abandon them, if we were convinced that some of these events were the explanation to why we have the desire. This is in correspondence with our intuitive idea of an authentic individual.

Another factor that determines the autonomy of an individual is the capacity to make decisions from one's desires. To be able to this is usually called decision competence. In order to reach a decision, it is not enough to want something. One also has to have beliefs on how to act in order to achieve what one wants. This component of autonomy is thus essentially about beliefs.

More precisely, for an individual to be decision competent she has to be able to choose an alternative from her desires and beliefs. For instance, this presupposes the ability to imagine non-realized possibilities, that is, a minimum of imagination. Furthermore, one has to be able to judge the alternatives one considers. In order to do that, one has to have an idea on what will happen given what one does and how much one values what will happen. Obviously, this is nothing but the process of deliberation.

Decision competence is also a matter of degrees. A decision can be more or less well founded (that is, founded on beliefs in which the person has good reasons to believe) and they can be more or less well considered. But are well founded and well considered decisions automatically more autonomous?

In a way, I will probably increase my possibility to succeed in being autonomous if my decisions are well founded and well considered. In order to really succeed in realizing one's desires one must have to a large extent true beliefs about the world. This since false beliefs about the consequences of one's decisions and actions probably will make me take a non-efficient route for the realization of my ends. In other words: my capacity to decide on what to do, does not necessarily increase the more I know, but my ability to succeed in living in accordance with my own basic desires probably will increase with more knowledge relevant to a decision.

This takes us to the last component in the conception of autonomy: efficiency. Efficiency is the ability to, through action, realizing that what one has decided.

A number of factors affect the efficiency of an actor. One factor, that has already been mentioned, is how well founded the beliefs that one acts upon are. Another factor is inner obstacles, for instance in the form of obsessions, that stands in the way of effectuating one's decisions. Also external obstacles, for instance coercive measures from others, can affect one's ability to realize one's decisions. Other people can also help a person to become *more* efficient by helping to develop the capacities required to effectuate the person's decisions. A deaf person may become more able to realize her desire to complete a course at the university, if she is provided with hearing aid and other facilities.

So far the conception of autonomy. How, then, can this conception be used to formulate ideals of autonomy? I will present two basic ideals: the ideal of actuality (or self-realization) and the ideal of potentiality.

4. Two Ideals of Autonomy

The ideal of actuality has the following idea about the value of autonomy: the value of autonomy consists in living one's life in accordance with one's own basic authentic desires, through realizing them one self. Crudely put, the more a person in fact succeeds in living according to her basic authentic desires, the more autonomous she is. And the more autonomous the person is (in this regard) the better it is for that person, *ceteris paribus*.

A person's degree of autonomy is then a function of the realized basic desire's authenticity (the more authentic they are, the more autonomous the person becomes given their realization), number and strength in comparison with the non-realized basic desire's authenticity, number and strength. In other words, the more "important" (strong) and "self-governed" (authentic) desires that the person succeed in achieving of the desires she has, the more autonomous the person is, the better for her. This ideal may thus naturally also be dubbed the

ideal of self-realization. This ideal captures the idea that the good thing about autonomy is to in fact succeed in living the life one wants to live.

The decision competence and efficiency of the person will determine the extent to which the person will succeed in realizing her desires. However, decision competence and efficiency does not have to be ascribed a value of their own, according to this ideal. They can be taken solely as necessary presuppositions to realizing the desires autonomously.

The ideal of potentiality says that the value of autonomy consists in being an *autonomous person*. This is a person with authentic desires, and enough decision competence and efficiency to implement these desires. The autonomous person, then, both has the capacity required and the actual conditions fulfilled in order to independently consider her own basic projects and values, make decisions on the basis of them and realize them through her own action. This ideal is to a great extent an ideal of character. An autonomous person is not akratic, self-deceiving, confused, phobic, and so on, since all these things tend to destroy autonomy in the sense defined here. This ideal also put emphasis on not being manipulated, coerced or in other ways prevented by others to realize one's plans of life. This ideal is probably widely cherished.

Also this ideal makes autonomy a matter of degree. The more authentic, decision competent and efficient I am, the better for me. The value, then, is to be such a person that *can* realize her desires, that is, *if* the person has desires, it is better if they are authentic and the person is capable of realizing them.

5. Concluding remarks

These ideals can make the defence of medical practices with reference to the value of promoting autonomy reasonable. Take the example of presymptomatic genetic testing. Further information can make me more capable of realizing my basic desires. However, it is important to emphasize that more relevant

information does not always increase the competence and efficiency of a person. Such information can in fact affect the competence and efficiency of a person negatively. Information that you are a carrier of a gene that will result in a lethal disease in a few years time can make you confused and/or depressed. And confusion and depression may make you less able to live the life you yourself judge to be good. And I would say that this would be a bad thing.