

The many faces of autonomy

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Abstract What does autonomy mean from a moral point of view? Throughout Western history, autonomy has had no less than four different meanings. The first is political: the capacity of old cities and modern states to give themselves their own laws. The second is metaphysical, and was introduced by Kant in the second half of the 18th century. In this meaning, autonomy is understood as an intrinsic characteristic of all rational beings. Opposed to this is the legal meaning, in which actions are called autonomous when performed with due information and competency and without coercion. This last meaning, the most frequently used in bioethics, is primarily legal instead of moral. Is there a proper moral meaning of the word autonomy? If so, this would be a fourth meaning. Acts can only be called moral when they are *postconventional* (using the terminology coined by Lawrence Kohlberg), *inner-directed* (as expressed by David Riesman), and *responsible* (according to Hannah Arendt). Such acts are *autonomous* in this new, fourth, and to my mind, the only one proper, moral meaning. The goal of ethics cannot be other than forming human beings capable of making autonomous and responsible decisions, and doing so because they think this is their duty and not because of any other nonmoral motivation, like comfort, convenience, or satisfaction. The goal of ethics is to promote postconventional and mature human beings. This was what Socrates tried to do with the young people of Athens. And it is also the objective of every course of ethics and of any process of training.

Keywords Political autonomy · Metaphysical autonomy · Legal autonomy · Responsibility · Kant · Postconventional humans

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Introduction

What do we understand by the word autonomy when we use it in a moral sense? Like many others, this word is *polysemous*. It has different meanings that we mix up frequently, resulting in an increase of confusion and misunderstanding. The question, then, is about the moral meaning of the word *autonomy*. In order to define its meaning, I will proceed chronologically, following the development of its meaning through time.

First meaning: Political autonomy

Autonomy is the transliteration of a Greek word used frequently in ancient times. Its meaning in antiquity was restricted to the field of politics. *Nómos* was the Greek word for law or rule. Autonomy therefore meant the political capacity of Greek cities to make their own laws, that is, the capacity to be politically independent or free. For this reason *autonomía* in the classical Greek language had a meaning very close to *eleuthería*, or freedom, another word with only political meaning and without today's philosophical content. As a consequence, *autonomía* is generally translated as "independence" or "freedom." This is the meaning of the word in Thucydides [1, bk. III.46], Xenophon [2, bk. VI.36], and Isocrates [3, sec. 68]. The first meaning of autonomy was political independence, commonly reached through warfare. This word did not have any philosophical meaning in antiquity. The word is only present twice in Aristotle [4, p. 124], once in the book of *Politics* [5, bk. V.12: 1315 a 6] and the other in the pseudo Aristotelian *Rhetoric to Alexander* [6, 1420 a 22].

Second meaning: Metaphysical autonomy

Some years ago, J.B. Schneewind published a book entitled *The Invention of Autonomy*. His thesis was that in modern times, more exactly in the 18th century, the word autonomy received a new meaning. The main influence for this change was Kant. It is generally said that with Kant, autonomy began to have a moral meaning. Schneewind begins his book by justifying its title. The book, he says, could have been titled "The Discovery of Autonomy." But this new meaning of the word autonomy, he argues, was more than a discovery. It was a true invention of Kant. It was an invention rather than an explanation. Schneewind says he wrote the book in order to decipher the reasons why Kant did such a strange and incomprehensible thing. "Autonomy, as Kant saw it, requires contracausal freedom. He believed that in the unique experience of the moral obligation we are 'given' a 'fact of reason' that unquestionably shows us that we possess such freedom as members of a noumenal realm. Readers who hold, as I do, that our experience of the moral ought shows us no such thing, will think of his version of autonomy as an invention rather than an explanation" [7, p. 3].

What is the reason for this strange phenomenon? By carefully analyzing the writings of Kant, the answer appears everywhere. In fact, and contrary to what Kant says continually, autonomy does not have a moral meaning in his work but a metaphysical one. Autonomy is a transcendental attribute of all human beings, one

that they enjoy from the very beginning. Autonomy is not a characteristic of some acts, i.e., acts performed with enough information, capacity, and freedom. Autonomy is primarily the essence of human beings as rational entities, no matter how they manage their moral lives or perform their moral acts. Autonomy is a “pure” feature, where “pure” is understood as opposed to “empirical,” as it is in many other Kantian contexts, such as “pure” reason, “pure” freedom, “pure” will. Kant made, for instance, a strong distinction between *Wille*, pure will, and *Willkür*, empirical will. The thesis defended by him is that morality can only originate in a pure and spiritual entity, different from our empirical or corporal being. This entity has been traditionally called soul, the activity of which Kant understood (departing from all other previous moral systems) to be autonomous and not obedient to heteronomous mandates. For him, it is “self-evident” that there must be a “pure” moral being, independent of any “empirical” influence [8, bk. I.3: 86–87].

Morality can only be grounded in the intelligible, supersentient, and transcendental world, different and opposite from the sentient one, as he says in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* [9, sec. II: 425]. “Thus every empirical element is not only quite incapable of being an aid to the principle of morality, but is even highly prejudicial to the purity of morals, for the proper and inestimable worth of an absolutely good will consists in this alone, that the principle of action is free from all influence of contingent grounds, which only experience can furnish” [9, sec. II: 426]. Autonomy means to be governed by “the will itself so far as it is determined by reason alone” [9, sec. II: 427]. “That which serves the will as the objective ground of its self-determination is the *end*, and if this is assigned by reason alone, it must hold for all rational beings” [9, sec. II: 427]. The Kantian autonomy is determined only by pure reason. The question is whether this “pure reason” exists or if it is an “invention” of Kant, as suspected by Schneewind. He says, “Kant embeds his conception of autonomy in a metaphysical psychology [which] presupposes that we are rational agents whose transcendental freedom takes us out of the domain of natural causation” [7, p. 515].

One consequence of this Kantian invention is that human beings are always autonomous, even when they perform heteronomous acts. Kant is perfectly aware that many human acts are not autonomous, but humans are responsible for all of them due to the autonomous character of his or her person. In any case, Kant is not very interested in defining the empirical criteria in order to determine an act as autonomous. His main interest is metaphysical, stressing the intrinsic autonomous character of human beings, that is to say, of human reason. This is why his idea of autonomy cannot be thought of as primarily moral. It is strictly metaphysical. As Schneewind says, because our moral capacities “are anchored in our transcendental freedom, we cannot lose them, no matter how corrupt we become” [7, p. 515].

Third meaning: Legal autonomy, or informed consent

The Kantian idea is an idealistic conception of autonomy. This is why, after Kant, the goal was to find another more realistic definition of autonomy. The result is the third meaning of the term, the legal one, which is used more commonly today. It refers

primarily to actions and not to persons. This is why James Childress asserts that this meaning should be called “the principle of respect for autonomy” (PRA), instead of “autonomy.” This change is important, he argues, “because many critics seem to suppose that proponents of this principle have an *ideal* of personal autonomy and believe that we *ought* to be autonomous persons and make autonomous choices. However, the ideal of personal autonomy is neither a presupposition nor an implication of the principle of respect for personal autonomy, which obligates us to respect the autonomous choices and actions of others” [10, p. 60].

The Kantian meaning of autonomy is directly related to autonomous persons, but not to autonomous actions. In fact, Kant did not define the empirical criteria for considering an action to be autonomous. He was not very interested in doing that, perhaps because he thought that an autonomous person necessarily must perform autonomous actions, and also because for him there are no non-autonomous persons, not even less autonomous actions performed by non-autonomous persons. In fact, Kant thought that the transcendental or metaphysical autonomy described above cannot be lost or diminished due to diseases [8, bk. I.3: 99–100].

It is as a reaction against this kind of conception that the third meaning of the word autonomy emerges. One example of this is the well known *Belmont Report*, which identifies “respect for persons” as one of the main moral principles. In the explanation of its meaning, the report describes autonomy in a very practical way: “To respect autonomy is to give weight to autonomous persons’ considered opinions and choices while refraining from obstructing their actions unless they are clearly detrimental to others” [11, p. 5]. The way of applying and operating this idea of autonomy is through informed consent. “Respect for persons requires that subjects, to the degree that they are capable, be given the opportunity to choose what shall or shall not happen to them. This opportunity is provided when adequate standards for informed consent are satisfied.... There is widespread agreement that the consent process can be analyzed as containing three elements: information, comprehension and voluntariness” [11, p. 10].

These are, in fact, the main conditions determined by law. First is knowledge: enough information about the decision to be taken. Second is competency: the capacity to understand and comprehend information. And the third is voluntariness: the absence of internal or external coercion. These three conditions can be defined and required by law. This is what has happened during the past 50 years, both in America and in many other countries around the world.

What does autonomy mean in bioethics?

The meaning of autonomy as used in bioethics is the last one, the legal one, as developed around the idea of “informed consent.” It is necessary to remember that the so-called bioethical principle of autonomy has been developed primarily by lawyers and judges.

This means that autonomy in bioethics always refers to acts and not to persons. But it also means that bioethics takes as autonomous, some acts that are performed by heteronomous people, as Faden and Beauchamp have asserted [16]. The typical

example of this is blind obedience. If I obey the mandates of my religious leaders, transferring to them my responsibility, my act must be taken as morally heteronomous, even when performed with the three legal conditions of autonomous acts, i.e., enough information, due competency, and lack of coercion.

In order to solve this problem, Gerald Dworkin proposed in 1976 to make a distinction between two levels of motivation [12]. This distinction and the coherence between the levels has been developed by James F. Childress. He proposed two orders of decisions, which he called “first order decisions” (those taken autonomously) and “second order decisions” (those taken following the mandates of others), and the need for coherence between them [20, pp. 60–61]. The problem is, what do we mean by coherence in this context? It can mean to give up or to give in to the wishes of another, transferring the responsibility to him or her. But it can also mean to assume the decision of the other because I agree with it or because I think it is right. The first is incompatible with moral autonomy whilst the second one is autonomous. This is the difference between *obedience* and *agreement* or *consent*. It is illustrative to read the following quote from Kant:

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a proportion of men, long after nature has released them from alien guidance (*naturaliter maiorennes*), nonetheless gladly remain in lifelong immaturity, and why it is so easy for others to establish themselves as their guardians. It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I need not exert myself at all. I need not think, if only I can pay, others will readily undertake the irksome work for me. The guardians who have so benevolently taken over the supervision of men have carefully seen to it that the far greatest part of them (including the entire fair sex) regard taking the step to maturity as very dangerous, not to mention difficult. [13, p. 384]

My impression is that bioethics is focused excessively on the fulfillment of the three legal requirements of acts that can be taken to be autonomous, forgetting that their goal is wider and more profound, i.e., the promotion of autonomous people, who avoid blind obedience and the discharging of their own responsibilities to others. In other words, I wonder if the idea of autonomy, or the respect for personal autonomy, as defined in bioethics, is properly ethical or, rather, strictly and exclusively legal. And if the latter, then we are entitled to ask whether there *is* a specific moral meaning of the word autonomy or whether we must resign ourselves to promote and implement only the legal one.

Looking for a fourth meaning: Is there a specific moral autonomy?

When distinguishing between obedience and consent, we are identifying a new meaning of the word autonomy that is different from the other three. An action of pure obedience can fulfill the three legal criteria for autonomous actions. But this action, which should be taken as autonomous from a legal point of view, is not autonomous from the moral perspective. This is why a fourth meaning of the word

autonomy is needed. As James Rachels said: “[To] be a moral agent is to be an autonomous or *self-directed* agent.... On this view, to deliver oneself over to a moral authority for directions about what to do is simply incompatible with being a moral agent.... [There is] a conflict between the role of worshipper, which by its very nature commits one to total subservience to God, and the role of moral agent, which necessarily involves autonomous decision making” [14, p. 334]. Robert Wolff adds: “For the autonomous man, there is no such thing, strictly speaking, as a command” [15, p. 41]. For Ruth Macklin, “to be autonomous in this sense is to have a ‘self-legislating will’, as Kant described it. The autonomous agent is one who is *self-directed*, rather than one who obeys the command of others. These descriptions of autonomy all presuppose the existence of an authentic self, a self that can be distinguished from the reigning influences of other persons or alien motives” [16, p. 263]. Autonomy, understood this way, is compatible with *agreements* but not with *obedience*, either human or divine. “The autonomous man, insofar as he is autonomous, is not subject to the will of another. He may do what another tells him, but not because he has been told to do it” [15, p. 14]. Acting only because another person or a law dictates it is immoral. “What is essential to the person’s remaining autonomous is that in any given case his mere recognition that a certain action is required by law does not settle the question of whether he will do it” [17, p. 215].

These statements are full of consequences. One of them was developed by David Riesman in his influential book, *The Lonely Crowd*, published in 1950 [18]. The thesis defended by Riesman is that the character of post WWII society impels individuals to “other-directedness.” This lifestyle has a coercive effect, which compels people to abandon the “inner-direction” of their lives, and induces them to take on the goals, ideology, likes, and dislikes of their community. The other-directed need to be assured that they are emotionally in tune with people around them. In the 1940s, the other-directed character began to dominate society. Today the triumph of that understanding is all but complete: it dominates everything from universities to TV talk shows.

This is what Hannah Arendt has called “the banality of evil” [19]. We are trivializing our moral life when we act to follow heteronomous criteria, like social conventions or obedience to ongoing norms. “The fallacy lies in the equation of consent with obedience,” she writes [20, p. 46]. “Much would be gained if we could eliminate this pernicious word ‘obedience’ from our vocabulary of moral and political thought” [20, p. 48]. This is the fourth meaning of the word autonomy, the moral one, in which autonomy is equivalent to responsibility. An action is moral when we do it as responsible or autonomous agents.

The problem is that the majority of our actions—of each one of us—are done in a way that we have called inauthentic or heteronomous. Autonomous actions are rare, unusual, and in some way, exceptional for human beings, when we take autonomy in its fourth meaning. And for most of humankind, heteronomous motives are the only ones they know and use during their lives. This was the conclusion reached by Lawrence Kohlberg [21, pp. 118–136]. In Kohlberg’s fourth stage, the only criterion is obedience to laws, respect for authority, and maintenance of the social order. In the United States most urban middle-class adults reach stage four, with only a small percentage using some stage five reasoning (the first of his six stages considered

postconventional). In urban areas of other countries, the picture is fairly similar. In the isolated villages and tribal communities of many countries, however, it is rare to find any adult beyond stage three [22].

This fourth and more profound meaning of the word autonomy has been generally criticized because there are only few decisions of human beings that can be called autonomous, and because even these actions are not completely autonomous due to the influence of many uncontrolled factors. As a consequence, it is usual to say that this is a purely “ideal” criterion. All this is true. It is also true that this criterion cannot be included as a “legal” requirement for autonomy. But we are not now talking about law and informed consent, but about ethics. And the question is, whether the promotion of autonomy, understood in this fourth sense, is not the more specific goal of ethics as a discipline. This was what Socrates tried to do with the young people of Athens. And it is also the objective of each course of ethics and of any process of training. The way to do this is “deliberation.” This is the proper method of ethics, as Aristotle said. Deliberation is the procedure by which one analyzes things in order to make reasonable, wise, responsible, or prudent decisions. This is the proper way of being autonomous.

This fourth meaning of the word autonomy is different from the other three, the political, the metaphysical, and the legal. There is a certain tendency to identify this fourth meaning with the second one, the metaphysical or Kantian. But this is wrong. As we have seen, the Kantian meaning was directly related to persons and not with acts. This fourth meaning, on the contrary, is only applicable to acts. The question is whether acts should be taken as autonomous when they fulfill the three legal criteria described above, or whether there are additional requirements they should satisfy. And the answer is that acts can only be called moral when they are *postconventional* (using the terminology coined by Kohlberg), *inner-directed* (as expressed by Riesman), and *responsible* (according to Arendt). Such acts are *autonomous* in this new, fourth, and to my mind, the only one proper, moral meaning.

Conclusion

What does autonomy mean from a moral point of view? My impression is that the goal of ethics cannot be other than that of forming humans capable of making autonomous and responsible decisions about things, and doing so because they think this is their duty and not because of any other non-moral motivation, like obedience, comfort, convenience, or satisfaction. The goal of ethics is to promote postconventional and mature human beings. Are we doing this? This is the question. The future of bioethics could depend on the answer we are able to give to this question.

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