AN INTRODUCTION TO AUTONOMY

A person with **autonomy** is, roughly, someone who has the ability to make his or her own choices. This requires that one be capable of understanding what the various options are, and be able to rationally choose among multiple options. Moreover, an autonomous person can think about how these choices relate to his or her values, and can reflect on these values for herself. While autonomy is a *vague* concept (that is, one can probably think of "in-between" cases where it's unclear whether a person has autonomy), there are nevertheless clear examples of autonomy and non-autonomy:

1. Normal adult humans are generally autonomous. They have the ability to understand important life choices, use evidence to make these choices, and reflect on their values.
2. By contrast, both prisoners and infants lack autonomy, though for different reasons. Prisoners lack autonomy because there are external forces (guards, prison walls) preventing them from executing the life plans they've thought about. Infants lack the necessary cognitive skills to even *understand* most important choices.
3. Autonomy is not, by definition, a function of age, or even of species. So, for example, elderly adults with dementia may lose the autonomy they once had. And fictional non-human characters like Spock, Chewbacca, etc. *would* be autonomous, if they existed.

Autonomy plays a central role in many moral issues. In particular, questions of autonomy are crucial when we try to figure when/if we can restrict a person's freedom for his own good (this is called **paternalism),** and when we try to determine whether (and to what extent) people are **morally responsible** for their actions. So, for example, most court systems hold that certain people (six-year-olds, people with very severe cognitive disabilities) can't be held criminally responsible for their actions, while other people (people who "let their emotions get the best of them") are *less* responsible than others (cold-blooded killers who planned the crime ahead of time).

A THREE CONDITION THEORY OF AUTONOMY

Burnon and Raley (2018) propose that a person must have three capacities in order to qualify as autonomous. Importantly, they don't require that the person always be *using* these capacities at each and every moment. Instead, the idea is that these are abilities the person *could* use when making choices.

- **Independence Condition:** "a person must have the capacity to make choices and not be under the control of any external constrain or inner compulsion." For example, a person would NOT meet this condition if (1) someone else is physically preventing them from doing what they like (or threatening them, etc.) or (2) they have an "inner compulsion" which forces them to act in certain ways (drug addiction, severe phobia, or similar things).
- **Competency condition:** "a person must have the capacities necessary to deliberate rationally about her choices." For example, a person would NOT meet this condition if she lacked the ability to understand what the choice they are making was "all about." For example, making an autonomous decision to undergo a medical procedure requires you have some understanding of (1) the benefits/harms of undertaking the procedure AND (2) the benefits/harms of refusing the procedure.
- **Authenticity condition:** "a person must have the capacity to discern and personally evaluate his own values, goals, and commitments." The idea here is that, since deliberating rationally about choices fundamentally depends on knowledge of what our *values* are, we should be able (at least sometimes) to reflect on what exactly our values *are,* and how they relate to the case at hand. We should also be able to reflect on whether our system of values is coherent/correct, and make revisions to our values based on these reflections.

For many ordinary, day-to-day choices, we won't generally use all three of these capacities. So, for example, choosing what to wear in the morning might require only independence plus a bit of competency (e.g., understanding you should not wear pajamas to a job interview). These choices require relatively little in the way of authenticity—you don't always need to reflect on things like "How does this choice relate to my most fundamental values? And are these the fundamental values I want to have, anyways?" We generally save these sorts of deliberations for "bigger" life choices, regarding relationships, careers, etc.

TWO WAYS OF LACKING AUTONOMY

So, what should we say about people who fail to meet the conditions for autonomy (that is, who lack AT LEAST ONE of the three capacities just described)? As it turns out, most ethicists put such people into two groups. First, there are those who have merely lost autonomy for a limited time. Second, there are those who have lost it for an extended period of time (and in some cases have never had it, or never will have it).

Temporary/Situational Loss of Autonomy. People can lose their ability to make autonomous choices for many reasons: illness (both physical and mental), drugs and alcohol, or the presence of outside forces/people who dictate their decisions for them. Some people may also lack autonomy in certain situations, even though they are perfectly autonomous in many others. So, for example, victims of abuse may lack autonomy in their private lives (especially in decisions relating to their abuser). Other examples might be people with phobias, or those who simply lack the specialized knowledge to make choices in certain sorts of areas (e.g., finance and medicine are among the most common examples).

For many of these cases (medicine, finance, drug addiction), most societies have a number of laws/policies to protect people from making bad choices when they temporarily lose their autonomy. However, the details of these laws and policies are often very controversial (and, in particular, it's difficult/impossible to design laws that don't "accidentally" limit the actions of fully autonomous people as well).

Long-Lasting Lack of Autonomy. In contrast to temporary/situational loss of autonomy, some people always lack autonomy. Ethicists often say that such people lack **moral capacity** or **moral agency,** which respectively relate to a person's (1) fulfillment of the three conditions of autonomy and (2) the ability to apply these capacities to moral issues.

WHY AUTONOMY MATTERS: AGENCY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND PATERNALISM

As just mentioned above, a person becomes a **moral agent** when they exercise their autonomy in certain sorts of situations. So, they make choices *independently,* they exercise their *competence,* and they do so *authentically*. On this definition, anyone who is autonomous *can* act as a moral agent, but they don't always do so. Instead, the amount of moral agency a person exercises will depend on the situation: sometimes they will exhibit a great deal of moral agency, sometimes barely any, and sometimes "some" moral agency.

So, Why Does Moral Agency Matter? Deference and Paternalism. While there are a number of reasons to care about moral agency, one big issue concerns the amount of **moral deference** we owe to a person. Here, moral deference involves respecting a person's choices, even if we happen to disagree with them, and even if we think these choices might end up harming that person.

In general, the amount of moral deference we owe to person in a given situation depends on how much moral agency the person is acting with in that situation. Basically, if a person is fully exercising their moral agency, we should generally let them do so (unless their doing so puts someone *else* in harm's way). By contrast, if a person isn't exercise agency, we might consider acting paternalistically in some way in order to "make" the person do what is (in the end) in their own best interest. "Paternalism" means something like "treat someone as if you were their parent," and this is the basic idea: it's perfectly OK to grab children to prevent them from running in the street, to make them eat vegetables, etc. This is because children lack autonomy (and thus, lack moral agency).

A classic example of a person exercising moral agency is from medicine: a person might autonomously choose to refuse life-saving treatment because it violates the religious principles to which they have devoted their lives. In this person truly understands the consequences of the decision (competence) and has also thought about its relationship to their most fundamental values (authenticity), we would say this person is acting as a moral agent. Moreover, most courts (and most hospital ethics boards) have held that owe this person a great deal of moral deference. And so, we shouldn't *force* them to have a surgery they don't want to have (i.e., we shouldn't behave "paternalistically" toward this patient). By contrast, we might make a very different judgement if the person in question did not exercise moral agency. So, for example, suppose that one patient rejects surgery because of a phobia about needles, while another rejects it because they couldn't understand the medical issue. Here, it would be much easier to justify some sort of paternalistic action, such as administering a sedative (in the first case), or perhaps bringing social workers/family/etc. (in the second case).

A Note on Paternalism and Interference. According to the account given here, it can (sometimes) be morally OK to interfere with people's choices "for their own good," especially when they aren't acting with full moral agency. This explains why, for example, it's OK to treat children, pets, and patients with dementia different than we treat adults. However, even we when we are dealing with people who *aren't* autonomous, the general rules should be something like "Don't interfere, unless there is a good reason." So, for example, parents and teachers are not behaving "paternalistically" when they make children follow rules that *aren't* for the child's own good. This doesn't mean that these rules might not be justified. However, they CANNOT be defended by saying "Well, the child doesn't have moral agency. So I get to make all their choices!"

DEBATES ABOUT AUTONOMY: DRACULA AND FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER

While autonomy is a central concept in both ethics and related areas (such as the law), it is also a **contested concept.** That is, while people generally *agree* that the general importance of autonomy and related notions (e.g., the idea that people have a right to make their own decisions, choose how to lead their lives, and so on), they do NOT agree on how exactly this works. Two major recent debates have centered around the concepts of **substantive autonomy** and **relational autonomy.** While I've briefly described these debates below, it's

important to note that there are many "intermediate" positions: e.g., ideas about autonomy that don't fall squarely into one category or the other.

Value-Neutral Autonomy vs. Substantive Autonomy. According to many traditional discussions, an autonomous individual is simply one who can/does make rational decisions based on their values, *regardless of what these values are*. So, for example, Dracula would probably count as autonomous on this view: he likes drinking human blood, and makes plan to do so. According to these accounts of autonomy, while we might interfere with Dracula to protect *other* people (e.g., his potential victims), we wouldn't do so paternalistically (e.g., to help Dracula find a sustainable, nonviolent way to get blood, and enjoy his life). The idea here is that a person can be perfectly autonomous even if they have values that are (from our standpoint) *bad* ones.

By contrast, theories of **substantive autonomy** posit that, in order to be truly autonomous, you have to certain sorts of *objectively good* values. On this view, Dracula *isn't* really autonomous, since things would end up much better for him if he found some more constructive hobby, and got his blood by buying it from blood banks (i.e., changed his values). The idea is that since Dracula *himself* would be more happy if he took joy in doing things that were helpful to humanity, rather than harmful to it. This view might support paternalistic action toward Dracula (assuming such a thing was possible).

Is Autonomy "Relational"? According to traditional conceptions of autonomy, what matter are properties of the *individual* person, and in particular their ability to make rational plans in light of their values. In recent years, however, a number of people have argued that people can only exercise their autonomy in the light of certain *relationships* with other people. These relationships (familial, romantic, friendship, political) both help provide people with their most fundamental values AND help condition their choices (so, for example, it's very difficult to make meaningful choices if you can't count on any support outside of yourself). Finally, most people's "conception" of themselves as thinking, reasoning, moral beings is tied up in the way they are viewed by others.

An example here might be Frankenstein's monster who, while perfectly "rational," didn't have any grasp on the way human values were supposed to work or how he "fit in" with humans. This explains why his actions (such as "murdering" people) weren't actually autonomous: he simply lacked the relationships to make sense of how any of these things worked. This view of autonomy (like the substantive view, of which it is a subtype) might support more active intervention (so, we might try to make sure that people like Frankenstein's monster are given social support early on).

In Defense of "Traditional" Autonomy. While ideas about relational/substantive autonomy have their defenders, they also have their critics. One worry might be phrased as follows: "Substantive and relational theories of autonomy require that one have the *right* sort of values or relationships. If one is lacking these, one isn't really autonomous, and so other people (the government, family, religion, etc.) might have the moral right to interfere in one's life, even if one's actions aren't harming anyone else. But do we really want to allow other people this sort of power over us? There are plenty of examples of governments, religions, etc. which *thought* they knew what the "best values" for people were, and which used this an excuse to treat individuals badly. So, if we want to protect individuals against this sort of thing, we should hold on to traditional (value-neutral) theories of autonomy."

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Use the ideas about autonomy from this lesson to explain why it's (sometimes) OK for parents, teachers, etc. to make decisions for children. What are the limitations on this right?
2. Give at least TWO examples of things that might cause a normal adult to temporarily lose their autonomy.
3. The following are examples of laws that are (at least partially) justified on "paternalistic" grounds (in order to "save people from themselves", especially in cases where they might not be acting with full autonomy). Do you think these laws are justified? Why or why not?
    a. Requiring people to contribute to government pension funds, to make sure they have money to live when they retire (in the U.S., this is called Social Security).
    b. Forbidding people from selling their kidneys, livers, or other bodily organs.
    c. Forbidding people from selling sex (prostitution).
    d. Limiting access to addictive drugs, such as opiates, cocaine, and methamphetamines.
    e. Laws aimed at promoting children's health/well-being, even if their parents disagree. (For example, seat belt laws, vaccination requirements, no alcohol/cigarettes, etc.).
4. Explain the differences between value-neutral and substantive autonomy. Which account do you find more convincing? Why?