Chapter 8

Autonomy

Chapter Objectives

Having read this chapter, completed the included exercises, and answered the associated questions, readers should be able to

- with reference to the exercise of one's sick mother, explain how the relative importance given to autonomy functions in decision-making processes;
- describe the notion of autonomy in general and its relation to conceptions of being human and politics specifically;
- in contradistinction to these other understandings of autonomy, explain the role that professional autonomy plays in engineering ethics.

EXERCISE ONE—PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY: YOUR SICK MOTHER (PART ONE)

To begin to understand the notion of autonomy, the following exercise asks the reader to consider what he or she would do in the situations described below:

1. Your mother is terminally ill in the hospital. You are her only relative. The doctor's prognosis is that your mother has, perhaps, 6 months to live. She is in acute pain, which can only be partially alleviated through medication. The doctor tells you about your mother's prognosis but not your mother. Which of the following would best characterize your reaction?
   a. You agree with the doctor that this decision not to tell your mother is for the best.
   b. You tell the doctor that not telling your mother is wrong, and try to change his or her mind.
   c. You tell your mother the doctor's prognosis while the doctor is absent.
   d. You do not tell your mother the doctor's prognosis directly but give her a variety of hints regarding the likely outcome of her disease.
   e. You study about the disease to be able to decide what to do next.
2. Your mother finds out about the doctor's prognosis. She wants to take an overdose of sleeping pills, which she asks you to get for her. Which of the following would best characterize your reaction?
   a. Refuse her request.
   b. Try to talk her out of this decision.
   c. Talk to the doctor and follow his or her advice.

    d. Do as she asks.

    e. Ignore her request.

3. You manage to talk your mother out of taking the pills. Several months pass, and now she is unable to take care of herself but still able to talk. Your mother tells you her suffering is unbearable, and that she knows her life is close to ending. Your mother requests that you administer a fatal dose of medication. Which of the following would best characterize your reaction?

    a. Refuse her request.

    b. Try to talk her out of this decision.

    c. Talk to the doctor and follow his or her advice.

    d. Do as she asks.

    e. Ignore her request.

4. Another 2 months pass, and your mother slips into a coma from which she is not expected to recover. Her body functions slow to the point that she is unable to breathe on her own, and she requires the help of life support. Your mother has previously given you instructions about what to do if she is in such a condition: she has repeatedly told you she does not want to be kept alive artificially, and you want to honor her wishes. However, the doctor refuses to disconnect your mother from life support. Which of the following would most likely characterize your actions?

    a. Disconnect your mother from life support while no one else is present.

    b. Follow what the doctor says.

    c. Try to talk the doctor into disconnecting your mother from life support.

    d. Take the matter to hospital administrators.

    e. Get a lawyer and try to have the courts force the hospital to disconnect your mother from life support.

Responses to these questions indicate one's views on autonomy. As with values in general, views concerning autonomy vary both individually and culturally. Take a few minutes to explain and justify the answers you gave: why wouldn't you make different choices? Why are other options less acceptable or unacceptable? What if the patient was not your mother but either a friend or a stranger? Would this change your answers? Why or why not?

8.1   AUTONOMY IN ENGINEERING

This chapter explores the idea of autonomy, especially in the context of engineering. As was discussed in relation to professionalism and businesses environments, autonomy is connected to ethical engineering: for the sake of public safety, at times, it might be necessary for engineers to exercise autonomy, based on their professional expertise. Additionally, autonomy is often considered central to the Western tradition. Thus, when studying engineering in cross-cultural contexts, it is important for students from other traditions to gain an understanding of autonomy. As with values in general, a failure to understand autonomy

can result in misunderstandings regarding decision-making processes. For these reasons, this chapter more closely examines the nature of autonomy and its relation to engineering ethics.

8.2 AUTONOMY AS A CONCEPT

"Autonomy" is closely related to individuality and refers to self-determination and independence from coercion, both internal and external, making decisions for oneself. Autonomy must, therefore, be based on knowledge and rationality—giving reasons for the decisions one makes, based on adequate information. Thus, the notion of autonomy supposes characteristics regarding the nature of being human.

Independence of judgment results from autonomous thought, the value of which has been considered "intrinsic" within the Western philosophical tradition. This means that independent judgments are considered valuable in themselves rather than for the accomplishment of other goals.[96] Whether or not human beings are actually autonomous, ideally they would be. Those incapable of arriving at their own independent judgments would lack autonomy, including very young and old people. For these reasons, the aim of "liberal" education—a general course of study to prepare one to live life—is to liberate or free people, gaining information and skills in reasoning to be able to make autonomous decisions.[97] However, freedom is only one part of autonomy. Autonomy also consists in responsibility.

With the freedom to make one's own decisions comes the responsibility for the decisions one makes. Ethical accountability is, thus, central to the ideal of autonomy. For this reason, autonomy can be experienced both as a burden and liberator. If people are incapable of acting autonomously, then their actions are not truly subject to praise or blame. Only those who make decisions—either for themselves or on behalf of others—can be praised or blamed. For example, children are not typically considered autonomous agents, possessing either the knowledge or abilities to make their own decisions and, for this reason, parents are praised or blamed for the actions of their children. This can also be true for adults. For instance, if one person coerces another, then the one being coerced would not be acting autonomously and, for this reason, would not be subjected to either praise or blame. The one coercing the other would be praised or blamed.

"Paternalism" refers to when one person decides or acts on behalf of another, for the benefit of the one on whose behalf a decision is made or action taken. As was mentioned in Chapter 3, paternalism consists in acting like a parent: one person cares about another but does not think the other is capable of

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96. For surveys regarding the role of autonomy in Western philosophical thought, see, for example, Christman (2015) and Dryden (2015).
97. Regarding the history of liberal education, see Kimball (1986).

making good decisions or taking correct actions, because of the lack of either knowledge or ability:

- Do you consider autonomy an intrinsic good? Why or why not? Do you think this is a result of your personal upbringing, cultural background, or a combination of both? Explain.
- Give an example of where/when autonomy has or has not been important in your own life. Was there an important life decision you made for yourself or that someone made for you?

8.3 AUTONOMY AND ENGINEERS

Autonomy is especially important because of its close connection with professionalism. Again, as was discussed at length in Chapter 3, professions are occupational groups given an especially high degree of autonomy, since neither their knowledge nor their expertise is easily duplicated. Claims for autonomy have traditionally been based on the expertise professionals have developed through long periods of study and training. For this reason, professionals possess an expert authority, previously ascribed to engineers. This authority is connected with autonomy. Professionals should be able to make decisions independent of hierarchical authority, since individuals occupying positions higher up chains of command might not share the expertise of lower ranking professionals. Hence, professions, professional organizations, and individual professionals are advocates for professional autonomy/independence.

In the tradition of professionalism, this advocacy has been framed primarily in terms of the professional-client relationship, where professionals make decisions for clients based on paternalistic motives: as experts, professionals would be in the best positions to determine which decisions and actions are in the best interests of clients. As a result of this knowledge, professionals would also assume responsibilities associated with these decisions and actions. In establishing the professional-client relationship—where professionals decide and act autonomously—the possibility always exists of paternalistic relations, professionals assuming responsibilities for decisions and actions on behalf of clients. The more autonomy is given to professionals, the less autonomy is available to clients. To ensure that this relationship does not become dominated by the variable—and, perhaps, arbitrary—judgments of individual professionals, professions are expected to exercise functions of control and sanction in relation to individual professionals. This refers to the contract model of professionalism discussed at length in Chapter 3, where professional organizations exercise controls over individual professionals.

Given this framework, it is easy to understand the importance of the use of reason and the acquisition of knowledge, as well as why occupational groups aspire to autonomy for their members. Additionally, this framework makes clear the prestige given to professional status: individuals and groups

characterized by professionalism are believed to have the highest amount of autonomy relative to other occupational groups.

Although engineers are given a degree of professional status in societies that emphasize professionalism, as was mentioned before, their status is still somewhat ambiguous. This ambiguity results from the fact that the professional-client model does not neatly fit engineering, since most engineers are first and foremost employees. The closest most engineers have to clients are their employers. Although engineers might work closely with the clients/vendors of the firms for which they work—especially in manufacturing and with regard to supply chains—engineers are ultimately beholden to their employers. Employers are in positions of authority over employees. Clients, by contrast, need help and seek out professionals as a result, such that clients are in positions of natural subservience to professionals. However, even within the framework of professional-client relationships, many have argued for increased client autonomy, based on the claim that all should be able to make decisions for themselves.

Debates surrounding this issue center on the extent to which "correct" answers should count in the decision-making process. Those who argue for client autonomy would hold that the freedom to make decisions for oneself is of higher value than arriving at the best decision. Further, they might argue that professionals are not in positions to understand the broader interests of clients, which encompass more than merely technical concerns.[98] Being able to argue for the importance of expert authority in the case of employed engineers, thus, requires more.

One must show that arriving at the best decisions is more important in the sphere of engineering than in other fields. This can be established by referring back to the first basic ethical principle for global engineering: "Engineers should endeavor, based on their expertise, to keep members of the public safe from serious negative consequences resulting from their development and implementation of technology." Given the importance of individual autonomy in many cultures, to further support this claim, a distinction between the value of autonomy in general and professional autonomy specifically should be kept in mind.

8.4   PERSONAL AND POLITICAL VERSUS PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY

A clear difference exists between the role an individual occupies as a citizen and participant in the society and the role an individual occupies as a professional. The justification for autonomy in the role of citizen and social participant might occur at two levels. The first consists in the essentialist claim that individuals are, by their

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98. This position can be seen, for example, in the medical field, where the patient's concerns supersede the concerns of healthcare professionals. For more on the divergence of the priorities of patients from healthcare professionals, see Stronks, Strijbis, Wendte, and Gunning-Schepers (1997).

very nature as rational beings, autonomous and deserving of autonomy. The second consists in the instrumentalist claim that individuals should be allowed to exercise autonomy for the sake of the proper functioning of society, based on ideals associated with liberal democracy—in other words, the claim society works the best when individuals decide and act autonomously. Neither of these two justifications applies directly to claims regarding professional autonomy.

In fact, with regard to autonomy, many generally argue that the most important potential conflict would be between professional duties and personal beliefs—in other words, duties following from and associated with a professional role and the basic moral beliefs of individuals—which could result in, for example, refusing to follow the instructions of a superior. While it would lead beyond the scope of topics under consideration here, it should be noted that manners of resolving such conflicts form one of the more contentious elements of debates within the field of professional ethics.[99] Clear from such debates, however, is this potential conflict between professional and personal ethics, resulting from the fact that the respective justifications for these two sets of ethics are different. Similarly, as a role ethics, justifications for engineering ethics are ultimately based on ensuring public safety.

Claims of autonomy for engineers should, therefore, be justified in terms of their reasons for existing within society: engineers exist to design, develop, and implement technologies, and, within these contexts, engineering ethics should ensure public safety. Claims of autonomy for engineers are, thus, justified with reference to the necessity of autonomy for engineers to properly carry out tasks assigned to them by society, rather than with reference to an essentialist or instrumentalist ideal of autonomy as central to either being human or social functioning.[100] Assuming this line of reasoning, engineers would be justified, for instance, in refusing to follow the orders of superiors in circumstances where following these orders would endanger public safety. In reaching such a conclusion, however, it is important to keep in mind other previously discussed duties that engineers have, duties related to their roles as employees, business ethics, and the recognition of cross-cultural concerns. The next chapter further considers the potential for conflicts among these demands, and explores possible solutions to these conflicts:

- Give an example of a conflict between professional duties and personal ethics and how this conflict could be resolved.
- Give an example of a situation in which an engineer might have to exercise professional autonomy in relation to a superior who does not have the necessary expertise to make the best decision.

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99. While this debate is not heavily featured in discussions of engineering ethics, it can be seen in many subdomains of professional ethics. For example, see Rassin (2008), Singhapakdi and Vitell (1993), Eastman, Eastman, and Eastman (1996), and Hazard (1992).

100. For a fuller consideration of the role of autonomy within engineering—in relation to professionalism, public safety, and cultural values—see Luegenbiehl (2007).

EXERCISE TWO—PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY (PART TWO)

Returning to your answers from the exercise at the beginning of this chapter, explain where and how your answers indicate the relative priority you give to either personal or professional autonomy.

8.5   SUMMARY

As the exercise concerning one's sick mother makes clear, to a large extent, the importance attached to autonomy can vary both individually and culturally. Nevertheless, as was discussed in previous chapters on professionalism and business ethics, the notion of autonomy is central to engineering ethics. Autonomy consists in not only making decisions and taking actions for oneself and others, but also taking responsibility for the consequences of these decisions and actions. Rather than framing autonomy in fundamentally essentialist or politically instrumentalist terms—where either individuals are conceived as intrinsically autonomous or autonomous actions are supposed to serve democratic social ends—autonomy for engineers is based on the role responsibilities of engineers. Insofar as engineers are professionals with obligations to public safety, engineers are justified in acting autonomously and, at times, paternalistically.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe the nature of personal autonomy and two situations where one would not be acting autonomously.
2. Explain "liberal" education and its relation to the ideal of autonomy.
3. Describe the nature of paternalism and explain its relation to autonomy and engineering ethics.
4. With regard to autonomy in the field of engineering, discuss problems associated with the professional-client model.
5. Explain two reasons autonomy would be justified for citizens and social participants. How are these different from the justification of autonomy for engineers?
6. When confronted with a directive by a supervisor who lacks professional expertise in the field of engineering, how might one exercise professional autonomy?

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