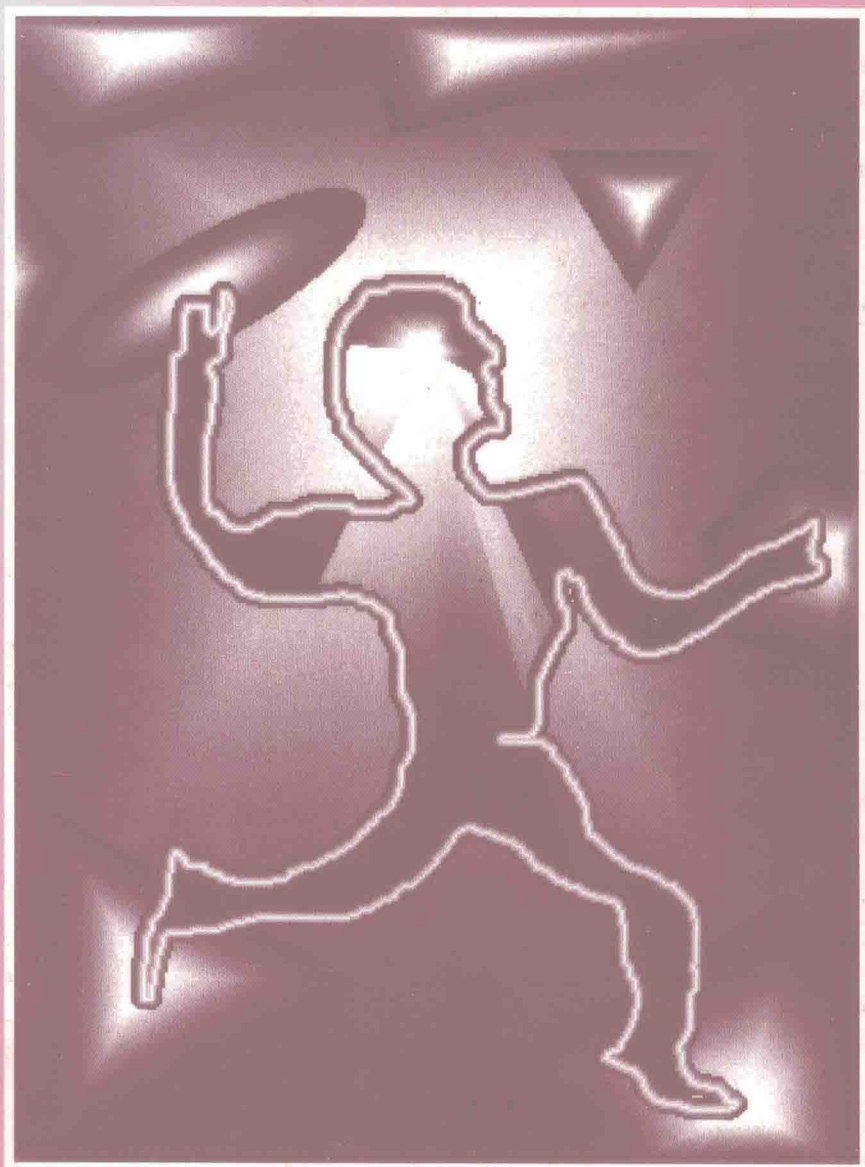


Autonomy and Social Interaction



Joseph H. Kupfer

Autonomy
— and —
Social Interaction

Joseph H. Kupfer

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For my daughter, Gabi

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Introduction

Autonomy has come to be a basic value, a priority in most of our lives. More than such established goods as happiness, virtue, and knowledge, it has become a crux of debate in both personal and political arenas. Disputes about work, education, child-rearing, and spousal conduct typically turn on considerations of autonomy. And in the political sphere, concerns over civil rights, abortion, and economic exploitation are fought out in terms of autonomy. Perhaps this is because autonomy occupies a foundational place among our many and varied values. Whether we value something, choose to pursue it, or critically assess its subsequent experience, largely depends upon our degree of autonomy. Without autonomy we can't decide whether what we value is worth cherishing or pursuing; we can't plan to become one sort of person rather than another. In this respect, then, the question of autonomy may be said to underlie other goods. We can always ask of any value whether it is held or sought in an autonomous fashion.

Nevertheless, it is good to remember that autonomy is a distinctively Western value and one that has emerged only in the last few hundred years of "Modern" philosophy and commitment. Nietzsche wrote that man is the "unfinished animal." The question then is, "How shall man be finished?" The emerging Modern ("autonomian") view answers that man must finish himself rather than be defined by an external authority. The project of self-completion presupposes

autonomy—developed capacities for self-determination as well as freedom from interference. Let's consider freedom from interference or restraint "liberty." It entails having options for choice and action.

Liberty is needed both to acquire and exercise autonomy, but autonomy is not liberty and requires more than liberty for its development and deployment. We could exercise the options afforded by liberty in a non-autonomous way: acting on ideas and values borrowed uncritically from others or doing what others tell us to do. We might realize an opportunity which we are at liberty to enjoy in a merely conventional or habitual way.¹ Moreover, we can fail altogether to avail ourselves of opportunities that exist due to lack of autonomy. Because of dependence on another or inability to control our emotions, for example, we might be unable to see or seize an opportunity.

The autonomous person's beliefs, values, and actions are somehow his "own." He determines his own ends and sets his own course of conduct. Autonomous choices and actions express the individual's preferences and aspirations. This requires conditions for developing independence of thought, the capacity for critical evaluation, strength of will, and confidence in one's ability to plan and carry out action. Liberty without this sort of autonomy is without value. Options without the ability to act on them independently are of no significance to the individual in question. They are like the chance to buy what we can't afford or enjoy what we can't appreciate—so many mirages of possible experience.

Because autonomy has not been recognized, much less valued, until fairly recently, it is easy to see it as historically determined or conditioned and so lacking in what might be considered "transcendental" importance. I'm not going to quarrel directly with those who take such a view, though the second chapter (on respect) indirectly addresses this by arguing for the value of autonomy. I will confront those who underestimate the significance of autonomy or lament it as merely a symptom of twentieth-century anomie. One who formidably does both is Alisdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. Bemoaning the lack of a unifying tradition in our age, MacIntyre

sees moral theory and discourse as fragmented (so far, so good). The contemporary emphasis on freedom or autonomy is but a further symptom of this lack of tradition to give unity to our moral thought. For MacIntyre, freedom is the calling card of an individualism which stresses the satisfaction of private desires at the expense of social meaning.

Although he offers a profound historico-cultural diagnosis of contemporary dilemmas and quandaries, MacIntyre's own solution is a tip-off to his major weakness. He languishes in a nostalgic call for preserving the Scholastic virtues until the collapse of modern morality makes their resurrection feasible. We must keep the flame of some past tradition burning amidst the chaos of rootless moralizing. What MacIntyre fails to see is that a new tradition is underway. Since Hobbes and Kant, Western culture has been moving toward a conception of autonomy as a foundational value. The Hobbesian strand of this movement conceives of freedom as liberty. It is a political perspective which understands the good life as maximal satisfaction of our desires with minimal interference by others or government. It is this impoverished and impoverishing conception of freedom that I think MacIntyre is justified in despairing over.

But another strand of modern thinking, descended from Kant and Rousseau, understands freedom as self-legislation. For Kant, this is individualistic and interior, consisting of the rational formulation of and adherence to moral principles. As we shall see in chapter 1, this is too narrow both in its moralistic content and in ignoring the material context of lived life. Rousseau conceives of freedom within the context of community. The struggle of this approach is to integrate the individual within the social whole *without* a definitive tradition and *with* his freedom intact. For Rousseau, this requires a commitment to and explication of legitimate political process. Rousseau's project, unlike the one undertaken in this book, is essentially political. He is concerned with reconciling individual freedom with legitimate political authority so that the individual can be obliged to obey the state and still be free.

The more general tension for champions of autonomy is between individual freedom and social integration. To me,

the ideal seems to be autonomous individuals living in community, developing traditions and institutions which confer enriching identities on their members. This is what Marx considered “concrete individuality,” in which the individual’s autonomy is harmonized, even enhanced, within a socio-economic framework. The two deficient extremes are more easily achieved than is this harmony of autonomy and community.

At one pole, autonomy degenerates into mere “subjective” freedom: an alienated, self-contained individual bereft of collective, social life. She achieves independence at the expense of the shared meaning which communal ties and organizations provide. This is caricatured by the image of the contemporary Yuppie—well-off, fashionable, unfettered by tradition, at liberty to consume commodities, but with no communal context to sustain her. Without community, autonomy tends toward self-absorption and alienation. This suggests that autonomy is not sufficient for the good life. We might say, paraphrasing Kant, that autonomy without community is empty; it lacks the content needed to make life complete. On the other hand (at the other extreme), without autonomy, community is likely to be stultifying.

The bonds of community threaten to restrict people in their quest for what they take to be best for them. Traditions and traditional values often smother talents and energies that could actually further the community’s ends. We have only to note the millenia-long subjugation of women to see the truth of this. What’s gained, of course, is the sort of stability which doesn’t issue from autonomously resolved conflicts and tensions. This species of unity is not very feasible for us. For one thing, the ideal of autonomy, if not its actuality, is too prevalent in American society (as well as a growing portion of the rest of the world). For another, the cost is great in terms of individual growth and happiness. We might say, continuing our Kantian paraphrase, that community without autonomy is blind. It lacks the guidance and direction and vision which autonomous people supply.

Lawrence Haworth puts the case more strongly: “A community, one may say, just by virtue of being a community,

has no value whatever.”² The shared way of life and purposes of the community must themselves be good. Haworth asks us to consider a community of Nazis or automatons. And this is instructive. However, he sees autonomy and only autonomy, as giving value to community. While I concur that autonomy adds value, and may be necessary for the fullest life possible within community, I think his position is too strong. A community can have many values even as it limits people’s autonomy (sometimes because it limits their autonomy).

A community may be enriched by other important values such as kindness, love, and happiness. A community of Quakers, Mennonites, or monks might have little autonomy but still promote human flourishing. I agree with Haworth that it wouldn’t be complete flourishing, but then partial flourishing is also likely in a community of autonomous individuals. Perhaps we can tentatively leave it that a community of autonomous individuals, in principle, has more potential for the good life and is not by its very structure cut off from avenues of human fulfillment.

The ideal is for our relationships with others to foster the autonomy of those involved, for our interactions to develop our capacities for self-governance and widen our range of choice. I have no comprehensive schema for creating an autonomous society. Rather, my much more modest undertaking is to investigate several specific relationships and contexts of interaction in which autonomy is pivotal.

I will look at the reciprocity between autonomy and social interactions from both sides: examining the role of autonomy in these interactions, and investigating the way our interactions in turn shape autonomy. The first involves showing the relevance and importance of autonomy for these social relationships. Autonomy grounds specific conduct and considerations. For example, an individual’s ability to function autonomously may require that we refrain from lying to him. However, the fact that someone has restricted our autonomy, or threatens to do so, may excuse or even justify our lying to him. Autonomy also conditions certain relationships, such as that between parents and children. Whether or not children autonomously accept benefits from their parents is

germane to whether they are obliged to reciprocate. And inequality in autonomy vis-a-vis their parents is an obstacle to adult children becoming their friends.

On the other hand, autonomy is promoted or limited, developed or truncated, by virtue of our interactions with others. Privacy, for example, is essential to the development of the sort of self-concept needed for autonomous living. In order for an individual to develop a conception of himself as an independent originator of thought and action, he must enjoy periods of independence from interference and observation. Mirroring the private is the public domain of architecture; built space can frustrate or foster autonomy in several ways. Buildings structure choice and control over what we see and do, help mold our body-image, and determine the nature and extent of our social interaction.

With a subject as broad as autonomy, selection of topics is to some extent arbitrary, reflecting the author's keenest interests. Although no doubt true here, there is a rationale governing what has been omitted. This is a work in social philosophy, concerned with the way autonomy figures in various social contexts. The scope of those contexts has been limited by concentrating on non-institutional interactions and relations. I try to confine my examination of autonomy to areas of life which do not involve highly systematized or regulated organizations of people. In order to provide focus and depth, institutionalized power structures are not dealt with directly. Thus, various institutional arrangements which seriously bear on autonomy are omitted: science, medicine, education, law, government, and economy—to mention the more conspicuous.

Autonomy is relevant to and enmeshed in every facet of life. The workplace, for example, is a prime locus of issues of autonomy. Indeed, it could further situate the discussions of lying, privacy, and respect. But, to investigate the workplace would naturally take us into issues of institutionalized power, thence to larger considerations of capitalism and socialism, and the whole wide world of political economics. This clearly would take us too far afield. So, I try to deal with autonomy in relations that are social but not "societal," in the sense of institutionalized power structures.

The broad canvas of morality is similarly narrowed. Taking up autonomy from a social perspective means engaging moral matters in light of human interactions and relationships. Moral obligation and character, for instance, are dealt with in the discussions of privacy and the parent-child relationship. But the social dynamic of that practice and relationship, the interpersonal stakes and stances, are emphasized rather than the precise lineaments of moral goodness and badness, rights or obligations. I don't, therefore, go into the difference between legal, political, and moral rights in the parent-child relationship. An autonomy-oriented approach is primarily concerned with the effect of relations and actions on autonomy and how autonomy in turn should determine social relations. This includes how autonomy bears on questions of obligation and responsibility. I look at obligation and responsibility in light of autonomic considerations, only to the extent that autonomy is implicated.

I will examine respect in a similar light. Considerations of autonomy impose obligation of respect. Autonomy is the ground of respectful consideration owed people. The ability of people to function autonomously imposes constraints and demands upon our behavior. Such considerations are further defined in particular contexts of interaction, such as the parent-child relationship and the opportunity for lying. In the former, the goal of promoting autonomy obliges certain behavior of parents because of their both privileged and responsible relationship to the children. In the matter of lying, our obligation to refrain from lying is articulated in terms of the curtailment of the liar's as well as the deceived's autonomy.

The book is written to be read either as an integrated treatment of autonomy or as a series of self-sufficient analyses of independent issues. As a whole it provides an ongoing examination of the nature of autonomy and how it plays a central role in social relationships. The chapter on respect pursues the more abstract analysis of autonomy begun in the first chapter by articulating the broad demands autonomy makes on our interactions with others. Those demands are further specified in the examination of the liar-deceived

interaction. We then see how autonomy informs the parent-child relationship. The discussion picks up the themes of respect and obligation in this particular relationship and goes on to show how autonomy helps define it. Since privacy is necessary to the child developing the sort of self-concept ingredient in autonomous functioning, the chapter on privacy helps fill in this portrait. Finally, we see how the public role of architecture complements privacy as a pervasive determinant of autonomy.

These last two chapters, it should be noted, include causal claims about the social conditions under which autonomy develops and flourishes. For support of these empirical claims, I refer to studies and theorizing by sociologists and psychologists. It seems appropriate that investigations in moral psychology and philosophical anthropology be buttressed by the work of social scientists.

Various topics also fit together in sub-groups: lying as a specific mode of failure to respect other and self; privacy as a fundamental way we show respect for one another in general, and in the parent-child relationship in particular; architecture as the public medium of the autonomy nurtured by the opportunity for privacy. Key themes run through different chapters, such as the nature of dependency, self-concept and knowledge, personal identity, and authority. At the same time, each chapter can stand fairly well on its own. Those wishing to pursue one or more topics in their own right can readily do so.

The goal of the approach taken here is to reveal how autonomy is a basic moral value, woven through different spheres of daily, social life. Seeing how it figures in a range of social relationships should deepen our understanding of autonomy and at the same time shed light on these relationships.

CHAPTER ONE

Autonomy: Dimensions and Distinctions, Conditions and Constraints

Autonomy is a complex concept and topic. Recent discussions reveal different types, levels, conditions for, and limits on it. Consequently, the purpose of this chapter is to draw together these sundry conceptions and discussions, if only in the process to clarify different aspects of autonomy.

I will begin by distinguishing between intellectual and volitional autonomy. Next, I will demarcate its moral and non-moral domains, as well as the first and second-order exercise of autonomy. In the course of examining these aspects of autonomy, I shall also discuss obstacles to or constraints on its exercise, and their different sources. However, I will mention only their correlates—conditions which make possible or enlarge autonomy. This is because later chapters will analyze these conditions in considerable depth. The personal, social, and physical relationships which enable us to function autonomously will be examined, for example, in chapters on privacy, the parent-child relationship, and architecture. Hence, for now, I will concentrate on the obstacles to autonomy as its various dimensions are delineated.

Autonomy is self-determination. The autonomous person is one who chooses for himself what to think and what to do. He is self-governing in that his actions spring from interests

and values that he has in some sense decided upon. Moreover, his beliefs are arrived at independently, by means of critical reasoning. In his beliefs and actions, then, the autonomous individual is guided by his own notion of what is right or best, feasible or desirable. Particular decisions may ultimately be based on his conception of the sort of person he thinks he ought to become, or life he thinks worth living.

As this tentative description suggests, the autonomous individual has a mind and will of his own. For a start, then, we do well to distinguish between autonomy of judgment and volitional autonomy. To speak of an individual functioning autonomously is imprecise and could refer to either or both human abilities. The individual must be able to think critically about his beliefs and values. This includes assessing the justification for these beliefs and reflecting on his epistemic standards. In addition, autonomy of will is needed to make plans and weigh the relative importance of different goals. Deliberating over choices, arriving at decisions, and finally acting on them, requires autonomy of will. Let's first consider intellectual autonomy, the autonomy of judgement.

Autonomy of Judgment

Autonomy in judgment is "thinking for oneself." It is a matter of forming beliefs on the basis of evidence, reasoning from similar cases, and anticipating contingencies as well as estimating their likelihood. The individual must also apply epistemic standards. Recourse to standards is necessary in order to assess the strength of evidence, the consistency of beliefs, and the quality of arguments. The fully autonomous individual, moreover, holds these standards critically, aware of their limits and value. He is, for instance, wary when he reads studies which report correlations between variables. He appreciates that without such constraints as control groups, correlations have but limited implications.

In its typical exercise, intellectual autonomy involves an awareness of how beliefs are justified, by both first-hand investigations as well as reliable testimony. Since it would be