



## Autonomy, Education, and Societal Legitimacy

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**ABSTRACT:** I argue that autonomy should be interpreted as an educational concept, dependent on many educative institutions, including but not limited to government. This interpretation will improve the understanding of autonomy in relation to questions about institutional and societal legitimate authority. I aim to make plausible three connected ideas. (1) Respecting individual autonomy, properly understood, is consistent with an interest in institutions in social and political philosophy. Such interest, however, does require a broadening of questions about institutional and societal legitimacy. (2) Individual autonomy can and should be re-conceived as a multi-institutional educational notion. We must appreciate the manifold institutional process. There are diverse questions about legitimacy as institutional and societal authority that generate normative demands binding on the individual. (3) There is some uncertainty about which institutions do or should educate for autonomy. The shift to an educational, multi-institutional model of autonomy renders more questionable and probably de-emphasizes the role of blame and punishment as paradigmatically institutionalized expressions of respect for autonomy in educating for autonomy. Nonetheless, such an educational model does not eliminate concern about autonomy, blame and punishment. Rather, it broadens questions about the legitimacy of the normative function of various institutions, and of society as a whole.

I

This paper is intended to make it plausible to believe three connected propositions. The paper is about the variety of social institutions that educate persons (for good or ill) about normative issues. It is about some connections between this institutional variety and an improved model of the central ethical notion of individual freedom as autonomy. Along the way, it is argued that the revision in the concept of autonomy also requires a revision in the concept of the legitimate authority to educate (if any such authority applies) of various institutions and society as a whole. The three propositions, and a brief explication of each one, are as follows.

(1) Individual autonomy (particularly as an ethical concept), properly understood, is consistent with an emphasis on the importance of institutions in social and political philosophy. This is so despite indications that some authors assume a conflict between autonomy-centered and institution-centered social and political thought. (1)

(2) Individual autonomy can and should be reconceived as a multi-institutional educational notion. The autonomous person is concerned on the new model to have an appropriate share of influence over the multiple institutions which educate her or him (for better or worse). The exercise of autonomy, when autonomy is interpreted as such an educational notion, is not always an activity analogous to the actions of governmental, or even governmental-like, institutions. The concept of self-government should be seen as only one aspect of a more comprehensive concept of self-education, in a better model for individual freedom as autonomy.

(3) There is some uncertainty about which institutions do or should fulfill the most important educational functions for autonomous persons. The shift to a multi-institutional educational model of autonomy probably de-emphasizes blame and punishment as paradigm expressions of respect for autonomy in educating for autonomy. "Morality" (in roughly Bernard Williams' sense (2)) as an institution focusing on general principles, moral obligation, and blame, continues to matter in a self-education model of autonomy, as does the criminal law, with its focus on general laws, obligation to obey, and legal punishment. The autonomous person, however, according to the self-education model advocated here, is also concerned about a due share of influence over many other institutions which shape her or him. Correspondingly, such an autonomous person will question the legitimacy of many institutions, not solely government. Such a person, moreover, will be concerned to reconstruct not only government but other institutions in light of what is best for autonomy (among other considerations).

## II

In their remarkable book, *The Good Society*, Robert Bellah and his co-authors discuss institutions in the United States of America. They scarcely mention autonomy. The discourse of autonomy came in for criticism in the authors' earlier *Habits of the Heart*, (3) so perhaps the authors view it as unnecessary to elaborate on the earlier criticism and more imperative to stress the critical discussion of institutions. In *The Good Society*, in a chapter entitled "We Live Through Institutions", they write:

"The classical liberal view has elevated one virtue, autonomy, as almost the only good, but has failed to recognize that even autonomy depends on a particular kind of institutional structure and is not an escape from institutions altogether." (4)

It is indeed a good thing to remind us that "autonomy depends on a particular kind of institutional structure. (What such a structure might be is, of course, a controversial matter.) It is a good thing, however, only if one does not reject autonomy altogether. There are signs, though, in *The Good Society* of a more puzzling and negative view than that about autonomy. Autonomy is criticized in the same breath as "Lockean individualism", and it is written:

"In the polity as in the economy, Americans have imagined that they can behave as autonomous individuals pursuing their own interests ... But the illusion that we are autonomous is becoming increasingly implausible as we experience more directly our dependence on collective forces." (5)

Discourse about autonomy takes many different forms. This paper does not profess to represent all forms of autonomy, nor, in particular, to defend Lockean individualism. This paper does aim to show, however, that emphasis on autonomy, appropriately construed, can be consistent with acceptance of an ethical and political outlook that acknowledges the significance of varied institutions. This also requires, however, a broadening of the question which institutions legitimately have the authority to educate in a way consistent with autonomy.

Contrasting *Habits of the Heart* with *The Good Society*, the authors write that "we are now focusing on the patterned ways Americans have developed for living together, what sociologists call institutions." (6) In an appendix on "Institutions in Sociology and Public Philosophy", there is additional discussion of the nature of institutions and how to study them. (7) The present paper agrees with much of that discussion, including the spirit of the remark that "we see a need in both the social sciences and philosophy for more explicit ways to attend to institutions." (8) This paper, however, constructively combines and does not contrast autonomy and institutions. Recent philosophical work on autonomy and other philosophical work on institutions suggests the feasibility of this. (9)

Suppose we think of autonomy as a capacity or tendency of a person to regulate freely that person's own psychology and acts on the basis of good reasons. Suppose further that we think of autonomy as to a large extent (not entirely) the product of education. The exercise of autonomy, moreover, can itself be conceived as an educational process. "Education", as used here, includes conscious and unconscious shaping by groups and individuals of a person's capacities and tendencies. Education is not limited, of course, to schooling. Education is accomplished through the action of many institutions.

What is an institution? Roughly (as in *The Good Society*), institution-concepts are used in the context of an area of social activity with characteristic values of its own, e.g., conceptions of goods and bads, roles, obligations, rights, virtues and vices, and so on. Participants in institutional activity, and others talking about them, often refer to an institution with an ordinary language word or a phrase: the state, the family, religion, and so on. There is, however, no necessity that all interesting institutions can be picked out in this way. It is, indeed, part of autonomy to seek deepened understanding and critique of the more and less obvious institutions that educate (for good or ill).

### III

In this paper, autonomy is conceived as an educational notion. By education, what is meant is primarily ethical and political education. Without abandoning completely the picture of autonomy as self-regulation, self-rule, self-determination, self-government (in particular), and so on, we wish to super-impose on this picture an idea that includes it but goes beyond it: the idea of self-education. As with self-government, self-education is rendered possible or facilitated by the acts of other individuals and society generally. Previously we defined autonomy as a capacity or tendency for a person to regulate freely that person's psychology and acts on the basis of good reasons. The exercise of autonomy in this sense could be conceived as a mode of self-education, as readily as a mode of self-government. A good reason, freely applied in self-regulation, teaches something, and one learns from it.

This suggested shift is partly a shift in metaphor. One's metaphors are no trivial matter philosophically. The metaphor of self-government encourages excessive attention to laws or analogously on moral principles in practical reasoning. Arguably, this is true of the Rousseau of *The Social Contract* or of some versions of Kantianism, a topic we discuss later. While laws and principles matter for autonomy, some good reasons appeal to neither. Another problem about autonomy, conceived as self-government, is that it too readily lends itself to excessive reverence for the state. By modeling rational freedom excessively on the idea of government, we encourage the acceptance of statist modes of thought without careful examination. Oddly, relying heavily on the metaphor of self-government can also encourage unreflectively excessive hostility to the state as the supposedly primary threat to autonomy.

The tendency of the metaphor of autonomy as self-government is to depict paradigm exercises of autonomy as less enlightening to the autonomous person than such exercises can be, and more a matter of coercion or constraint, legal or moral. This is admittedly a

matter of nuance. Ideas such as government, rule, regulation, determination, do allow to some extent for the governor to influence the governed, and vice versa, by back-and-forth exchange of reasons, or careful justification by the governor, or free acknowledgment by the governed of the merits of a policy, or even the personal transformation of the governor or the governed. There is also a temptation, however, to think of these notions in terms of command and obedience, the imposition of one will on another, a sequence in which neither those who command nor those who obey learn much. In exercises of autonomy, sometimes the person who commands is the same as the person who obeys, and governmental metaphors can encourage the picture of a strangely divided being. These coercive or constraining connotations of talk about the interpersonal phenomena of governing and being governed are too readily transferred by analogy to the internal organization of the supposedly autonomous person.

Often, writers on autonomy stress the ideas of law, government, and the like. So Joel Feinberg:

"Philosophers have long had an expression to label the realm of inviolable sanctuary most of us sense in our own beings. That term is *personal autonomy*. The word 'autonomy' is obviously derived from the Greek stems for 'self' and 'law' or 'rule', and means literally 'the having or making of one's own laws.' Its sense therefore can be rendered at least approximately by such terms as 'self-rule,' 'self-determination,' 'self-government,' and 'independence.' These senses are all familiar to us from, their more frequent, and often more exact, application to states and institutions. Indeed it is plausible that the original applications and denials of these notions were to states and that their attribution to individuals is derivative, in which case 'personal autonomy' is a political metaphor." (10)

Gerald Dworkin, similarly, writes:

"What I believe is the central idea that underlies the concept of autonomy is indicated by the etymology of the term: *autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule or law). The term was first applied to the Greek city-state. A city had *autonomia* when its citizens made their own laws, as opposed to being under the control of some conquering power." (11)

The Greek city-state, we are told by Dworkin, was autonomous to the extent that it was free of foreign domination.

Now by way of contrast, it is worth remarking that "nomos" can be law, but can also be convention, usage, or custom. To some extent, this helps us to challenge the focus on the state in many pictures of autonomy, and to shift to a picture of acculturation that is more general and more complex than governmental control. Whatever the Greeks said, as everyone should acknowledge, how we develop and modify our metaphors is up to us. The individual self, we suggest, is found in large part by acceptance, rejection, modification, or innovative creation of this or that set of conventions, customs, usages: generously call these institutions. To summarize, autonomy can be conceived as self-government, but only if that is understood as compatible with self-education through diverse institutions. The autonomous person is not solely concerned about the state and its commands (or analogous phenomena), but also the generation of many normative urgings through many institutional forms. The legitimate authority of these diverse institutions, and of society as a whole, requires scrutiny in terms of respect for autonomy in the re-interpreted sense.

#### IV

It is in the nature of institutions that there is no finite list of institutions. Nor is there a uniquely correct institutional description and explanation of a society's activities. Which institutions do educate is a difficult question to answer; which should, still more difficult.

The law-oriented and moral-principle-oriented outlook is an artifact of a particular philosophical period. During this period, especially from Rousseau onward, much emphasis has been put on whether or how the state might be legitimate, especially in those laws which demand obedience on pain of punishment for disobedience. Sometimes, as in Rousseau, this admittedly tremendously important question distracts us from the critical examination of other aspects of autonomy and institutions: the inadequacies of the patriarchal, sentimental nuclear family, for example, which can itself crush autonomy. This undermines Rousseau's political theory. The less socially explicit approach of Kant also focuses on general moral principles which are law-like, and corresponding obligations, transgressions of which demand blame. There are many corrective complexities in Rousseau and Kant. This paper is somewhat caricaturing these great authors to make a point. As pre-eminent modern theorists of autonomy, their influence has furthered a focus on criminal laws and moral principles in autonomy-centered politics and morality. One of the purposes of a multi-institutional, educational account of autonomy is to correct that view of autonomy.

It requires more discussion than can be supplied here, but the change in emphasis advocated here requires a correlative re-thinking of the role of blame and punishment in morality and law, in light of changed views about autonomy. Radical skepticism about the justifiability of blame and punishment is one serious alternative. What is more likely, however, is the following. The connections between the theory of autonomy and the theory of blame and punishment will have to be re-conceived. The best education for autonomy may turn out to have only a subsidiary role (if any) for blame and punishment. We do not now know this. But we cannot do moral and political philosophy as if it were self-evident that the big questions are about moral or political obligation and related issues about blame and punishment. That older way of thinking still conceives of autonomy (as a capacity) in its role in violations of general principles or laws, violations that subject the violator to blame or punishment. Blame or punishment of agents for actions which violate general moral principles, or the criminal laws, continue to be important institutions, worth critical examination. Critique and re-construction of such institutions is very important in the account of what constitutes a legitimate social and political order. Blame and punishment, however, are at most a part, and perhaps a small part, of the set of institutions which would best educate for autonomy. (12)

## Notes

(1) See, e.g., Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society*, Knopf, New York, 1991.

(2) See *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1985, especially Chapter 10, "Morality, the Peculiar Institution".

(3) Robert N. Bellah, *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985.

(4) *The Good Society*, p. 12.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 112.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 4.

(7) *Ibid.*, pp. 287-306.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 303.

(9) For a sampling of views about autonomy, see John Christman, ed., *The Inner Citadel-Essays on Individual Autonomy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989. Views on autonomy may be distinguished according to the degree and manner in which they incorporate reference to institutions into an account of what autonomy is. Philosophers are not always self-conscious about this when they write about autonomy.

For an interesting discussion of institutions, see Marcus Singer, "Institutional Ethics", in A. Phillips Griffiths, ed., *Supplement to 'Philosophy'*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 223-245.

(10) See, in Christman, Joel Feinberg, "Autonomy", pp. 27-53, especially p. 27.

(11) See, in Christman, Gerald Dworkin, "The Concept of Autonomy", pp. 54-62, especially p. 57.

(12) Interestingly, Joel Feinberg is aware of the possible future decay of the nation-state, and he concedes that this might require some adjustments in our thinking about the analogy between autonomous individuals and autonomous states. Feinberg, however, does not seem to favor or even entertain the idea that if there were fundamental institutional changes, we might do well to modify our reliance on analogies between individual persons and states so far as the theory of autonomy is concerned. See *Harm to Self*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986, pp. 50-51.

Feinberg is here commenting on autonomy as the "sovereign authority to govern oneself". His position seems puzzling for many reasons, especially in its unsupported assertion that even if a sense of world community grows, we ought to continue to model individual autonomy on the nation-state.