

Ethics: Autonomy and Health (Spring 2014)

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# RELATIONAL AUTONOMY

# CONCERNS ABOUT THE HISTORY OF AUTONOMY IN PHILOSOPHY

- Often based on paradigm of privileged men
  - Socialized to prefer separateness
  - More opportunities to remove themselves from (some) relationships at will
  - Minimal restraints and repercussions for bucking norms
- Autonomous capacities might, as a result of oppression against (e.g.) women, show up less often in women
  - Reinforces notion that ideal autonomous agent will have masculine traits



# TO DISCUSS

- Friedman states: “The cultural understanding of autonomy needs to change if the concept is to be relevant for women” (36).
  - Do you agree that the conception of autonomy needs to change from the Gauguin-esque ideal?
  - Or should women be given more opportunities for relational detachment, etc. that are more available to men (leaving the traditional conception of autonomy intact)?

# ROLE OF EMOTION

- Historically believed men are ruled by reason, whereas women are ruled by emotion
  - Reason as the better, “more human” faculty
- But making a rational decision need not preclude emotional assessments
  - Ignoring emotion can even be *irrational* (e.g., marriage proposal)
- Reason can be informed by emotions and *vice versa*
  - Not isolated faculties



# FRIEDMAN'S PROCEDURAL ACCOUNT

- Must appropriately reflect on choices without autonomy-undermining interferences
  - Reflective self-understanding + absence of undue coercion/manipulation
- “socialization does not as such impede autonomy, whereas [undue] coercion as such does so” (37)
  - Socialization is crucial for development of mature autonomy competency

# COERCION

- “is not centrally a matter of producing hurt or harm, but rather of structuring the options available to another. Coercive proposals are designed to produce compliance by making it the condition of avoiding unacceptable consequences, “so they always place severe restraints on victims’ capacities to act” (Onora O’Neill)
- Can be benign or malign, (arguably) intentional or unintentional, fair or unfair, morally permissible or impermissible

# FRIEDMAN'S PROCEDURAL ACCOUNT

- Need to value relationships and communities as necessary for our agential development
  - But no particular lifestyle is necessary to demonstrate autonomy (e.g., don't need to abandon family to live up to ideal) → more inclusive account
- ...What if I'm socialized to be servile and repressed?
  - What is a prototypical case of undue coercion that would make us doubt someone's autonomy? What's a prototypical case of unproblematic socialization?
  - Do you think this question can be answered cross-culturally?



# PROBLEM OF GASLIGHTING

- “her view of herself has been altered so that she no longer regards herself as competent to answer for actions” (Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, pg. 30)
- Gradual and subtle form of oppression
  - How could being subject to gaslighting affect someone’s autonomous abilities?

# AUTONOMY AND RELATIONSHIPS: IN CONFLICT?

- Concern: If we should value relationships, and if autonomy necessarily undermines relationships, then autonomy should not be valued.
  - *Autonomophobia*—fear of others' exercise of autonomy
- When parties to a relationship critically reflect on that relationship, they will consider viable alternatives and might lose the stability of their relationship
  - Not all relationships should be saved



# AUTONOMY AND RELATIONSHIPS: IN CONFLICT?

- But critical reflection can also strengthen a relationship
  - Autonomy neither necessary nor sufficient for disrupting a relationship
- Promote autonomous capacities → chosen relationships/communities will more closely resemble what people would want for themselves
  - Is it problematic that we can be thrust into some relationships/communities against our wills without any possibility for escape? That our autonomous choosing can only go so far?

# FINAL THOUGHTS

- Autonomy as **intrinsically** and **instrumentally valuable**
  - Intrinsically: Necessary part of our development as moral agents
  - Instrumentally: Means for resisting oppression, seeking fulfilling and valuable relationships/communities
- To end/reverse autonomy disruption in oppressed groups, need combination of cultural change in values + promoting autonomy (properly conceived)

**QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?**

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