

# FEINBERG ON AUTONOMY

Bioethics: Autonomy and Health (Fall 2012)

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# SENSES OF 'AUTONOMY'

- **Capacity**
- **Actual condition**
  - *De jure vs. de facto*
- **Ideal of character**
- **Sovereign authority**

# AS A CAPACITY

- Capabilities in varying degrees
  - Reasoning ability, ability to understand, extensiveness of personal values, etc.
- Threshold for *competence*
  - Threshold determined by task at hand
  - Everyone above threshold is equally competent for task, though some might perform it more or less well
  - Everyone below threshold is unable to perform task

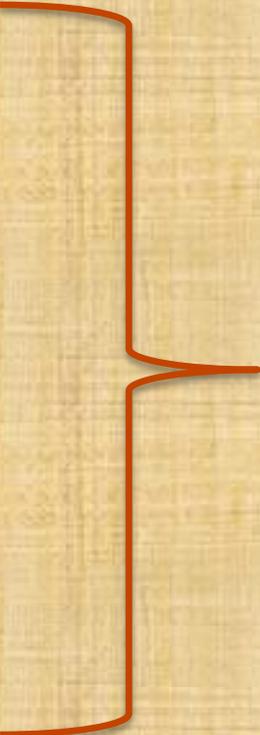
# AS AN ACTUAL CONDITION

- Internal + external factors
  - Capacity for self-government
  - Opportunities to exercise these capacities (largely a matter of luck and circumstance!)
- Congruence of virtues tied together through family resemblance relation
  - Causally and conceptually interconnected
  - “corresponding to each is a distinctive way of falling short of the composite ideal” (32)

# AS AN ACTUAL CONDITION

- Virtues:

- Self-possession
- Individuality
- Authenticity
- Self-determination
- Self-legislation
- Moral authenticity
- Moral independence
- Integrity
- Self-control
- Self-reliance
- Initiative
- Responsibility for self



**Be careful of over-idealizing  
and overrating any of these  
dimensions!**

# AUTHENTICITY

- Threatened by
  - Conformism
  - Rugged individualism
- “he can and does subject his opinions and tastes to rational scrutiny [...] he can and does alter his convictions for reasons of his own, and does this without guilt or anxiety” (33)

# SELF-DETERMINATION



- Process of self-development does not require *ex nihilo* self-creation
  - Given set of circumstances → dispositions, unintended socialization and learning
  - Child slowly and gradually contributes more and more up through adulthood
- “Self-creation in the authentic person must be a process of self-*re*-creation, rationally accommodating new experiences and old policies to make greater coherence and flexibility” (35)

# MORAL AUTHENTICITY

- Characterized more by a moral court than laying down the law for oneself



- Weigh and balance interests, obligations, morally salient factors, reasons in favor of viable alternatives

# HUMANS AS SOCIAL ANIMALS

“The human world does not and cannot consist of millions of separate sovereign ‘islands’ each exercising his own autonomous choice about what, where, how, and when he shall be, each capable of surviving and flourishing, if he so chooses, in total independence of all the others, each free of any *need* for the others” (46)

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Feinberg argues that moral action, if it is a mindless reflex, is not autonomous, whereas a self-reflectively and intentionally evil person can be autonomous (39). Do you agree?
- Do you agree that, for autonomy to be an ideal, it cannot be the case that the uncommitted person is an “autonomy hoarder”?
  - What is the right amount of commitment?

**QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?**