

# G. Dworkin on Moral Autonomy

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Bioethics: Autonomy and Health (Fall 2012)

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# Moral Autonomy?

- “A person is morally autonomous if and only if his moral principles are his own” (34)
- What makes a principle your own?



# The Challenge

- Can I be autonomous and follow moral precepts that were not derived by me?
  - If not, then have to
    - A) adopt a Kantian conception of moral autonomy, and
    - B) have to resolve numerous philosophical puzzles and implausible views of agency associated with Kantian views
  - If so, then have to determine the limits and value of autonomy and what the legitimate sources are for moral precepts

# Problems with a Kantian Conception

- Empirically false:
  - “this view denies our *history*. We are born in a given environment [...] We mature more slowly [...] It makes no more sense to suppose we invent the moral law for ourselves than to suppose that we invent the language we speak for ourselves” (36)
- Moral principles have an intrinsically **social** aspect:
  - Their interpretation, function, comprehensibility, and basis for criticism and standards all “preclude individual invention” (37)

# Moving Away from Kant



- Even if we don't derive moral principles ourselves or determine what is and is not ethically relevant, "the ultimate weighting of the moral factors is the agent's decision and his alone" (37-38),
- Autonomy cannot be supreme in ethics
  - Otherwise, could never be fully obligated
  - Many obligations are independent of what I voluntarily commit myself to

# Moral Authority



- MISTAKE:
  - “The refusal to acknowledge the very idea of moral authority, the equation of imitation with animal characteristics (copycat, monkey see, monkey do), the identification of maturity with doing things without help, by (and for?) oneself” (43)
- If we accept the testimony of authorities for (e.g.) scientific facts, can we not accept the testimony/advice of authorities for moral facts?
- Conclusion: No particular conception of autonomy is entailed (conceptually) by the nature of moral agency.

# Discussion Questions

- How do you think Kant would respond to Dworkin's criticisms?
- Do you agree that someone can retain autonomy while following moral authority?
- Do you think critical reflection of every moral precept and obligation is necessary?

# Group Activity

For each case, answer these questions:

- What type of paternalism is of concern here?
- Is the paternalism justified?
- What are the competing interests or obligations that should be considered?

## Team 1:

Laws that require  
cyclists to wear  
helmets

## Team 2:

Laws that prohibit  
smoking in public  
places

## Team 3:

College requirements  
that student be  
vaccinated

## Team 4:

Governmental requirement  
that people contribute to  
Social Security

## Team 5:

Laws that forbid  
homeschooling

Questions? Comments?

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