

Bioethics: Autonomy and Health (Fall 2012)

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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



# 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 + internal coherence
- “socialization does not as such impede autonomy, whereas [undue?] coercion as such does so” (37)
  - Socialization is crucial for development of mature autonomy competency
- Need to value relationships and communities as necessary for our agential development
- ...What if I'm socialized to be servile, self-sacrificing, and repressed? Line between socialization and coercion?

# AUTONOMY AND RELATIONSHIPS: IN CONFLICT?

- Concern: If we should value relationships, and if autonomy necessarily undermines relationships, then autonomy should not be valued.
- When parties to a relationship critically reflect on that relationship, they will consider viable alternatives and lose the stability of their relationship
  - Not all relationships should be saved
- But critical reflection can also strengthen a relationship
- Autonomy neither necessary nor sufficient for disrupting a relationship



# THE NEED TO BE VULNERABLE

- “Being open, receptive, flexible, and tender, being emotionally invested in relationships or committed to undertakings” (Carse 35)
  - Risk loss, failure, heartache, security, confidence
- Vulnerability necessary for flourishing
  - Otherwise would not have close affiliative bonds
- Morally obligated to be vulnerable and to embrace interdependency
  - Cannot be fully committed to projects or to others without taking risks

# MYTH OF THE "IN-CONTROL" AGENT

- “self-sufficiency, independence, a capacity for deliberation and rational transcendence of emotion” (Carse 36)
- Useful for critiquing unjust paternalistic interventions
- But it “is morally costly, for there is much about the human condition that it obscures, ignores, distorts, and effectively denigrates in virtue of its silence about our vulnerabilities” (36)



# OPPRESSION AND AGENCY

- Trauma & oppression → loss of control, overwhelming emotions, indecision, lost sense of self, felt powerlessness, inability to communicate
- Can be overcome through empathy, compassion, and supportive communication
- Renewed “control” through empowerment and “exercising capacities for mutuality through which we can emerge out of isolation” (Carse 45)

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- When does oppression threaten autonomy?
  - Can agency ever become completely frozen or immobilized?
- Given our vulnerability and interdependence, what moral obligations do we have in supporting each other's autonomous agency?

**QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?**

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