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The multidimensional concept of autonomy and the role of hope in its promotion

Alessia Cadelo

Introduction

Autonomy is a multifaceted concept which has a great value in modernity. The word derives from Greek and it literally means self-governing. In general terms, being autonomous means possessing self-consciousness, rationality and will in order to have the capacity to critically evaluate one's desires and values and act on those that one recognizes as one's own. On the contrary, a person who lacks autonomy is controlled or influenced by external factors and he is unable to act according to his authentic self¹. Therefore, autonomy is associated with self-determination, self-governance and freedom from external influences. It even functions both as a status and capacity concept. As a status, it implies that individuals should have the right to exercise self-government over their own lives; as a capacity, it presupposes that adults, at least without any cognitive impairment, should be able to act autonomously². Thus, it is a rather nebulous term. The aim of this paper is precisely to try to clarify the autonomy's meaning and investigate the role of hope in its promotion. Accordingly, it will be pursued an ethical inquiry into the concept, by drawing on the influence of key figures. In the first

¹ A. Reath, *Autonomy, Ethical*, in E. Craig (a cura di), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. I, Routledge, London 1998, p. 723. J. Christman, *Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy*, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, a cura di E. N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Stanford 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/autonomy-moral/>.

² C. Mackenzie, *Relational Autonomy: State of the Art Debate*, in *Spinoza and Relational Autonomy*, 2019, p. 19.

paragraph, it will be discussed the notion of autonomy emerging from the liberal tradition, also known as the traditional view, as it originated from long-standing roots and over time has become mainstream due to its significant impact³. However, this perspective has been criticized by feminist thinkers because is overly individualistic and ignores the role of social-relational conditions in the fulfilment of autonomy. Thus, in the second paragraph it will be examined the relational conception of autonomy. The authors discussed in this paper have been selected because they are highly representative of the debate in question; Frankfurt⁴ and Dworkin⁵ in particular provide foundational and influential accounts of autonomy which have constituted the conceptual foundations upon which relational autonomy theorists have articulated their critiques and alternatives. Christman⁶ raises some criticisms against their perspectives and elaborates a theory of autonomy premised on a socio-historical conception of the self. His contribute is fundamental as, even if his account remains internalist, he nevertheless acknowledges the influence played by the social and cultural context onto autonomy. Mackenzie plays a decisive role in systematising and consolidating the literature on relational autonomy⁷. Finally, it will be examined the role of hope in the promotion of autonomy.

Before proceeding in such examination, some preliminary distinctions will be made. Firstly, freedom and personal autonomy, even if related, are two distinct concepts. According to Dworkin, freedom

³ S. Mhlambi, S. Tiribelli, *Decolonizing AI Ethics: Relational Autonomy as a Means to Counter AI Harms*, in *Topoi*, XLII, 3, 2023, p. 870.

⁴ H. Frankfurt, *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person*, in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68, 1, 1971, p. 15: “Analogously, then, the statement that a person enjoys freedom of the will mean [...] that he is free to will what he wants to will, or to have the will he want. [...] It is in securing the conformity of his will to his second-order volitions, then, that a person exercises freedom of the will”.

⁵ G. Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 20: “autonomy is conceived of as a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes and so forth and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values. By exercising such a capacity, persons define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives, and take responsibility for the kind of person they are”.

⁶ J. Christman, *The Politics of Persons: Individual Autonomy and Socio-historical Selves*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 154: Autonomy “involves competence and authenticity; authenticity involves non-alienation upon (historically sensitive, adequate) self-reflection, given one’s diachronic practical identity and one’s position in the world”.

⁷ C. Mackenzie, *Relational Autonomy: State of the Art Debate*, cit, p. 22: “My proposal is that to do justice to this complexity it would serve us better to understand autonomy as a multidimensional, rather than a unitary concept, comprising three distinct but causally interconnected dimensions or axes: self-determination, self-governance and self-authorisation”.

concerns the ability to do whatever one wants, while autonomy pertains self-determination. Coercion and force seem to interfere with both, but deception interferes only with autonomy. Therefore, they are not identical: autonomy seems to be a more global notion than freedom⁸. However, Christman highlights that even autonomy could denote both a global condition (refers to entire life) or local concept (relative to a certain aspect, trait, motive or value). As a consequence, autonomy and freedom should be distinguished differently. Whereas freedom pertains to the capacity to act without external or internal constraints, autonomy regards the independence of the desires, values, and emotions that motivate action⁹. Secondly, moral autonomy should be distinguished from personal one; the former refers to the capacity to act morally while the latter is an ability that could be extended to any aspect of lives, not just to issues of moral obligation. Finally, it is necessary to distinguish between basic and ideal autonomy. The former corresponds the minimum degree of independence and ability to speak for oneself. The latter, however, is a goal to aspire to. Clearly, the second one can only be achieved by a small number of individuals, whereas basic autonomy implies that most adults¹⁰ can consider themselves autonomous¹¹. This paper will deal with basic and personal autonomy.

1. *The liberal tradition of autonomy*

The concept of autonomy, as it is generally understood today, was defined by John Stuart Mill, in his famous essay *On freedom* in 1859. He did not speak properly of autonomy, he used instead the more general term self-definition: according to him, it should be conceived both as a

⁸ G. Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, cit, p. 14: "Suppose we think of liberty as being, roughly, the ability of a person to do what she wants, to have (significant) options that are not closed or made less eligible by the actions of other agents".

⁹ J. Christman, *Autonomy and Personal History*, in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21, 1, 1991, p.17.: "Generally, one can distinguish autonomy from freedom in that the latter concerns the ability to act, without external or internal constraints and also (on some conceptions) with sufficient resources and power to make one's desires effective [...]. Autonomy concerns the independence and authenticity of the desires (values, emotions, etc.) that move one to act in the first place"

¹⁰ J. Christman, *Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy*: To be autonomous is necessary to possess a least a minimum grade of rationality, self-awareness and the capacity to decide about important spheres of their life. Therefore, I will exclude prenatal lives, children and all those adults who do not possess such capacities.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

capacity and right to govern himself, to be determined by desires, preferences, values that are authentically one's own and not the product of unwarranted external influences. Therefore, the underlying conception of person of this concept of autonomy is individualistic¹². This is the liberal tradition's fundamental premise and it is shared by many authors, such as Frankfurt and Dworkin. Frankfurt's account is one of the most influential and it has a hierarchical structure. According to him, there are two desires' level, namely "first order desires" and "second order desires". The former refers to the basic capacity to desire to do or not to do certain things, while the latter involves the ability for self-reflective evaluation, unique to humans, and it is the capacity non just to desire, but to want or not want certain desires¹³. The notion of will, as employed by Frankfurt, «it is the notion of an effective desire-one that moves (or will or would move) a person all the way to action»¹⁴. This kind of desires are labelled as "volitions of the second order" and, to be a person is essentially to have the second order volitions, not only the more generic "second order desires". Freedom of will is exercised when first order desires align with and are supported by second-order desires, and then, people identify with or are satisfied by these desires¹⁵. Dworkin shares with Frankfurt the key assumption that the fundamental characteristic of being a person is the capacity to reflect upon their second-order desires, wishes and intentions and act accordingly. According to him, autonomy includes not a mere ability to self-reflect and evaluate but also change one's preferences, act according to them and act according to them precisely because they have been adopted as one's own after a critical reflection. This process of self-reflection is not totally explicit neither fully articulated and conscious; thus, Dworkin's conception of autonomy is not intellectualist. Furthermore, he argues that, to make their values and desires effective in their lives, people should have a certain degree of liberty, power and control over important domains of their lives¹⁶. Another fundamental requirement is the so-called "procedural independence": in this regard, Dworkin distinguishes those ways of influencing people that bypass their rational and reflective abilities from those which improve them. Examples of the

¹² J. S. Mill, *Three Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-London 1975, p. 15. K. Atkins, *Autonomy and autonomy competencies: A practical and relational approach*, in *Nursing Philosophy*, VII, 4, 2006, p. 207.

¹³ H. Frankfurt, *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person*, cit. p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 10.

¹⁶ G. Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, cit. p. 20.

first type of influence are hypnotic suggestion, manipulation, coercive persuasion, subliminal influence and so on. To be autonomous, the process of self-reflection should be independent from these kinds of pressures. At the same time, there should not be any constraint on the contents of desires, values, preferences and so forth¹⁷.

Several objections have been raised against Dworkin's position. Christman in particular images a person who lives a completely submissive life and who identifies his own first-order desires that constitute that kind of life. He also supposes that this subservient life has been adopted because of socialisation and fierce conditioning. In hierarchical analysis, that person would still be considered as autonomous as his high-order desires are consistent with low-order desires. With this approach, called by Christman the "time slice" approach, what matters is just the person's evaluation of the desire at a particular time. Nevertheless, as he lived in an oppressive context, his values are not authentic in a real sense; they are the product of education and upbringing¹⁸. Thus, this account seems to be unconvincing when it is a question of judging a person's autonomy. Christman developed a new model of autonomy that «involves competence and authenticity; authenticity involves non-alienation upon (historically sensitive, adequate) self-reflection, given one's diachronic practical identity and one's position in the world»¹⁹. When he addresses competence, he means that, to be autonomous, a person must be minimally rational and in possession of minimal self-control. Moreover, the capacity to form effective intentions in the absence of external barriers is required. However, he focuses mainly on the authenticity condition and on the relative notion of alienation. It should not be confused with a lack of identification; it is indeed a stronger reaction, which involves a sensation of being constrained by the trait in question and the firm intention to repudiate it²⁰. Secondly, alienation is not a pure cognitive judgement; it includes even deeply emotional and affective components. Rather, it must be intended as an active resistance to a factor. Therefore, the non-alienation test holds that a component of an individual's motivational set is authentically his own if, upon hypothetically reflecting on the historical

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁸ J. Christman, *Autonomy and Personal History*, in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, XXI, 1, 1991, p. 7.

¹⁹ J. Christman, *The Politics of Persons: Individual Autonomy and Socio-historical Selves*, cit, p. 154.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

processes that led to its formation, he would not reject or feel estranged from it²¹. In summary, Christman's conception's fundamental premise is an historical account of the self. Indeed, he recognises the social and historical influences on the process of desire and preference formation. Nevertheless, his theory remains explicitly internalist, as the non-alienation test is a requirement for autonomy that concentrates entirely on the internal structure of the individual's mind²². His perspective, like Frankfurt's and Dworkin's accounts, has the merit of having underlined the psychological requirements for autonomy, namely a minimum grade of rationality, the ability to self-reflect critically upon preferences and ideas and the absence of self-deception²³. Yet, feminist theorists have raised many objections to these approaches. Starting from these, they developed new theories of autonomy that have been labelled as "relational".

2. Relational autonomy: Mackenzie's perspective

In general terms, the major feminist critiques of the liberal notion of autonomy are premised on the idea that human beings are not individualistic as presupposed by the internalist accounts of autonomy. Indeed, human beings are not entities separated from the rest of the world; rather, they are interwoven in a network of relationships. Therefore, since the notion of subjectivity underlying internalist approaches of autonomy is regarded as unrealistic, even autonomy needs to be re-conceptualised²⁴. These refigured conceptions of autonomy have been called "relational autonomy". The term, as conceived by Mackenzie and Stoljar, does not refer to any specific view. Rather, it is an umbrella term, including different perspectives, whose fundamental assumption is precisely «the conviction that persons are socially embedded and that agents' identities are formed within the context of social relationships

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 156.

²² C. Mackenzie, *Relational Autonomy: State of the Art Debate*, cit., p. 16.

²³ Christman, *Autonomy and Personal History*, cit., p. 17: "The requirement of self-awareness, then, will resemble minimal rationality rather closely, in that for both conditions the agent is not autonomous if there are beliefs, plausibly attributable to the agent, which are manifestly inconsistent. In the case of self-deception, this inconsistency is 'buried' by the agent's tactics of not focusing her awareness on the suppressed belief".

²⁴ C. Mackenzie, N. Stoljar, *Introduction: Autonomy Refigured*, in C. Mackenzie, N. Stoljar (a cura di), *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 7.

and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity»²⁵. As there are a lot of variegated theories of relational autonomy, it is not possible to illustrate them all here. Instead, I will focus on Mackenzie's account, as she elaborates a tripartite model of autonomy, encompassing the various dimensions of autonomy identified by diverse relational autonomy perspectives. According to Mackenzie, autonomy is a multidimensional concept, which includes three distinct but interdependent dimensions: self-determination, self-governance and self-authorisation²⁶. The notion of self-determination is at the core of the concept of autonomy, especially in moral, liberal, and political discourse: namely, it defines the individual right to determine the path of one's life and exert control over important areas of it. The self-determination axis presupposes external, structural (political and social) conditions for personal autonomy, specifically conditions of freedom and opportunity. A self-determining life requires indeed certain political and personal liberties, which are specified in the freedom conditions. Instead, personal, social and political opportunities are intended as the opportunity conditions. Opportunities are relevant for autonomy since they enable the realisation of formal liberties into meaningful, substantive freedom. A person who is guaranteed formal freedoms but who cannot access a sufficient set of genuine opportunities is likely to struggle to pursue a self-determined life²⁷. However, values of freedom and opportunity are weighted differently by different theories. Libertarians conceive freedom mostly as a negative liberty, namely as non-interference by others or by the state. Therefore, theorists who support this conception are likely to prioritise freedom conditions over the opportunity conditions²⁸. According to Mackenzie, they overlook the importance of autonomy of access to numerous and variegated opportunities. Furthermore, libertarian theorists do not sufficiently address the equal distribution of opportunities and neglect the possibility that some individuals may require greater social support to lead self-determining lives. As a consequence, they fail to identify and discuss the impact of social domination on individuals' capacities to carry on a self-determining life, which, on the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁶ C. Mackenzie, *Three Dimensions of Autonomy: A Relational Analysis*, in A. Veltman – M. Piper (a cura di), *Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, p. 16.

²⁷ C. Mackenzie, *Three Dimensions of Autonomy: A Relational Analysis*, cit. p. 26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

contrary, is one of the central issues of relational perspectives. These indeed are more concerned with opportunity conditions²⁹.

While the self-determination axis identifies the external and social conditions for autonomy, the self-governance dimension describes the internal skills (authenticity and competence) that are necessary to be self-governing. More specifically, the self-governance axis «involves having the skills and capacities necessary to make choices and enact decisions that express or cohere with one's reflectively constituted diachronic practical identity»³⁰. Authenticity conditions illustrate the requirements by which a choice, value, commitment, or reason can be regarded as genuinely one's own. In this regard, she adopts the definition of authenticity provided by Christman, according to which being an authentic person implies the reflective acceptance of one's own motivations without being alienated in light of one's own history and one's own diachronic practical identity³¹. Competence conditions describe the set of capabilities or skills that a person needs to have to some degree at least to be self-governing. Cognitive skills are required, ranging from a minimal degree of rationality and self-awareness to more complex abilities for critical reflection along with volitional skills, for instance, self-control and decidedness. Relational autonomy theorists agree upon the importance of such skills for self-governance³². Nevertheless, they argue that philosophers have overestimated rational abilities for critical reflection by disregarding a number of capabilities that, as socially embodied humans, are equally necessary to be autonomous. Therefore, relational approaches deepen the philosophical account of autonomy competence by offering a more nuanced and expansive analysis of the skills required for self-governance. The abilities included in such analysis are emotional, like emotional responsiveness and the capacity to interpret one's own and others' emotions; imaginative, which enable people to imagine themselves otherwise, namely to explore alternative possibilities for themselves, including possibilities of action, desire, emotion, and belief; and social or dialogical skills, necessary for self-knowledge³³.

The third axis, self-authorisation, «involves regarding oneself as authorised to exercise practical control over one's life and to determine

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³¹ J. Christman, *Autonomy and Personal History*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Autonomy*, Routledge, London – New York 2022, p. 182.

³² C. Mackenzie, *Three Dimensions of Autonomy: A Relational Analysis*, cit., p. 33.

³³ *Ibid.*

one's own values and identity-defining commitments»³⁴. In Mackenzie's opinion, self-authorisation involves three different conditions: the first, named "accountability condition", implies that a person regards himself as an agent accountable for his own actions; the second one, called "self-evaluative attitudes condition", implies that a person holds appropriate attitudes of self-esteem, self-trust and self-respect; since these attitudes are intrinsically social, they in turn assume that the person is considered as an autonomous agent even by others. This last condition has been labelled as the «social recognition condition»³⁵. Thus, it seems possible to conclude that autonomy can't be reduced to self-determination, but it is a socially and culturally embedded notion, which encompasses several dimensions.

The role of hope in the promotion of autonomy

According to the standard account of hope, with its precursors in Aquinas and Hobbes, it is a combination of the desire of *p* and the belief that *p* is possible but not certain. However, this combination does not explain all instances of hope, nor does it capture the difference between hope and despair³⁶. Luc Bovens was the first to argue that 'mental imaging' about the desired outcome is a necessary component of hope, emphasising in this way the tight relationship between hope and imagination³⁷. More recently, Humbert Droz and Vazard have claimed that «hope is an emotion that typically triggers immersive imagination aimed at "trying on" a desired reality»³⁸. In their perspective, this hoped scenario has an epistemic value: engrossing oneself in a desired scenario grants insight into the implications such an outcome would have on various aspects of one's existence, as well as the emotional response one would have to these novel life circumstances. In other words, through the immersive imaging we simulate the beloved situation, and,

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁶ J. Huber, *Imaginative Hope*, in *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, XI, 1, 2025, p. 155, R. S. Downie, *Hope*, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XXIV, 1963, p. 249.

³⁷ L. Bovens, *The Value of Hope*, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LIX, 3, 1999, p. 674.

³⁸ S. Humbert-Droz – J. Vazard, *Imagining Out of Hope*, in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, LXXV, 1, 2025, p. 100.

by doing so, we gain new information³⁹. Therefore, hope could foster imaginative skills. As in Mackenzie's account they are necessary to be autonomous, being hopeful could promote autonomy. Furthermore, hope is strictly tied to self-esteem: several studies confirm a positive correlation between hope and self-esteem in adolescents, young adults and clinical populations: higher levels of hope are associated with greater self-esteem and vice versa⁴⁰. Hence, it seems possible to conclude that hope is strongly connected to two dimensions of autonomy, namely self-governance and self-authorisation.

Conclusion

In summary, autonomy is a multidimensional concept, that it is associated, among others, with self-determination, self-governance and freedom from external influences. According to the liberal tradition, being autonomous means indeed establishing one's own interests, goals, values and conception of a good life, free from unwanted interference⁴¹. However, feminist theorists objected that this vision presupposes an individualistic conception of subjectivity, which is unrealistic. Therefore, they proposed alternative accounts of autonomy, labelled as relational. According to Mackenzie's approach, autonomy encompasses three different but intertwined axes: self-determination, self-governance and self-authorisation⁴². Within this framework, hope could play an important role in the promotion of autonomy, as it fosters imaginative skills and self-esteem. In other words, being hopeful would have a positive impact even on the exercise of autonomy.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁴⁰ H. O. Alaeddine, *Hope and its relation with self-esteem among a sample of Lebanese university students*, in *Journal of Umm Al-Qura University for Educational and Psychological Sciences*, XIV, 1, 2022, p. 12; M. Jenabi Ghods – L. Fattah Moghaddam – M. J. Hosseinabadi-Farahani – M. Pourebrahimi, *The Mediation Role of Self-Esteem and Hope on the Relationship of Quality of Life and Unmet Needs of Elderly with Psychiatric Disorders*, in *Journal of Education and Health Promotion*, XII, 1, 2023, p. 164; M. Merkaš – A. Brajša-Žganec, *Children with Different Levels of Hope: Are There Differences in Their Self-Esteem, Life Satisfaction, Social Support, and Family Cohesion?*, in *Child Indicators Research*, IV, 3, 2011, p. 511.

⁴¹ J. Christman, *Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy*.

⁴² C. Mackenzie, *Three Dimensions of Autonomy: A Relational Analysis*, cit., p. 16.