Arpaly: Varieties of Autonomy

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Introduction

Autonomy:

- A forgotten term?
- To answer questions that are seemingly overlooked, it is necessary to clearly define what is actually being asked
An Overworked Term

“When I make a word do a lot of work, I always pay it extra”

- Autonomy has become a cloudy term; attention has shifted from questions of praise/blame, responsibility and lack thereof, to questions about what autonomy is and if it even exists.
Eight Definitions of Autonomy

- There are at least eight distinct things we sometimes call “autonomy” and according to Arpaly they need to be kept apart.
- In discussions they are usually treated as if they are all the same, or as if their individual “institutions” that they concern are equally relevant to the question at hand.
- This discussion is meant to question whether or not it is actually useful to use these individual definitions separately, or whether institutions regarding “autonomy” should simply be removed from praiseworthiness/blameworthiness discussions all together.

Webster’s dictionary definition: independence or freedom, as of the will or one’s actions; self-governing
Agent-Autonomy (1)

- “The relationship between an agent and her motivational states...characterized as the agent’s ability to decide which of them to follow”
- Type of **self-control** or self-government that humans have, but nonhumans animals do not; very broad
- Autonomy” and “agency”, or “autonomous action” and “action, are NOT interchangeable to Arpaly. To her, not every theory of action is also a theory of agent-autonomy, nor does every theory of action include a notion of agent-autonomy.
  - Ex. Davidson’s Theory of Action - a movement is an action if it is caused, in a specific way, by a combination of a rationalizing desire and belief. If glancing at your watch is caused by a desire to know the time and the belief that looking at my watch will tell me the time, it is thereby an action
  - In Arpaly’s terms, not a theory of agent-autonomy, but a theory of action in which agent-autonomy plays no role.
Personal Efficacy (2) and Independence of Mind (3)

- **Personal efficacy**: absence of dependence on others; having the ability to get along well in the world without requiring *material* help from others.

- In this sense, Arpaly says a person can make themselves more autonomous by learning how to drive, becoming rich, or gaining things such as knowledge or physical strength.

- **Independence of mind**: same concept as personal efficacy, but instead of referring to physical independence, one does not require *psychological* assistance from others.

- Those who lack independence of mind may not always lack agent-autonomy:
  - Ex. of man urged to stop obeying his wife.
Normative (4)

- **Moral autonomy**: the one invoked when people ask to be allowed to make their own decisions and to be free from outside/paternalistic intervention

- Often a connection between agent-autonomy and normative autonomy, however this connection *cannot be assumed*
  - Ex. if someone steals from you, that person violates your autonomy in the “normative sense” but it is a very plausible claim that you are no less an autonomous agent because of it. You are no less capable of governing your own actions than you were a moment ago

- Decisions made on incomplete or misleading data are everywhere; to hold that these decisions are deficient in autonomy would seem to make autonomy too scarce on the basis of moral responsibility
  - Ex. the doctor who lies to a patient about his condition, ignoring the fact that he is in the process of making an important employment decision where his condition would be relevant
Authenticity (5)

- Velleman: draws distinction between authenticity, which he believes to be the same as being true to one’s values, and autonomy - self-control or self-governance
- There are some people who have a strong measure of autonomy, but whose very self-control allows them to live out of touch with what he refers to as their “real selves”
  - Ex. the man who has a passion for literature but represses it due to his conviction to become a “real citizen”
- “You must excuse her, she is under a lot of stress and is not herself”
Authenticity contd.

- **External desires**: feelings or desires that are not wanted by that person, ex. Frankfurt’s “enraged man” who feels as if his anger is an alien intruder and thus not truly his own.
- External desires are neither an indication of autonomy or self-control, nor an indication of lack thereof.
  - Being possessed is not always an indication that the desire itself is denying ones “real self”; the enraged man may have honest feelings of anger, though he feels they are not truly his own.
  - On the other hand, Arpaly gives the example of addicts in religious 12-step programs that experience their sobriety as the will of God taking over.
Self Identified (6) and Heroic (7)

- **Self-identified person**: person with harmonious and coherent self-image who never experiences her desires as an external threat.

- **Heroic autonomy**: ideals relating to liberation, freedom, and other states that are supposed to be desirable and only attainable by few. “This can be related to previously-discussed definitions of autonomy; heroic authenticity, heroic self-efficacy, perfect inner harmony that leaves no room for externality, or an ideal combining of all of the above.”
Respond to Reasons (8)

- The ability to respond to reasons; in general & moral reasons in particular
- While it is not often argued that autonomy is the same as rationality or reason-responsiveness, intuitions about autonomy and the lack thereof are often influenced by intuitions about rationality or reason-responsiveness and the lack thereof
- Things that impair our ability to respond to reasons are supposed to impair our autonomy
  - Ex. Alcohol, hypnosis
- How can reasoning in terms of autonomy, confuse, rather than clarify, important ethical issues?
Example: Ann & Beth

- **Mele (2005):** Ann is an autonomous agent who works diligently as a philosopher, and enjoys her profession more than anything else. Beth is also an autonomous agent working as a philosopher, however she values many things over philosophy. Their Dean desires Beth’s work ethic to become more like Ann’s, so without her knowledge, he brainwashes Beth to become a “psychological twin” of Ann.

- Is “new” Beth autonomous in the sense of self-control? What about reason-responsiveness?
- Is Beth responsible for her actions?
Summary

1. **Agent-autonomy**: self-control; deciding which actions to follow
2. **Personal Efficacy**: non-necessity of material assistance
3. **Independence of Mind**: non-necessity of psychological assistance
4. **Normative**: moral; ask to be free from outside intervention
5. **Authenticity**: being true to one’s values/“real self”
6. **Self-identified**: harmonious self-image; no threat from external desires
7. **Heroic**: liberation/freedom/other states desirable and attainable by few
8. **Reason-Responsiveness**: ability to respond to reasons/act rationally
Pop Culture Example

- Walter White, from Breaking Bad
- “A high school chemistry teacher turns to a life of crime in order to provide for his family’s future” (IMDB.com)
- After he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he needs a way to make fast cash so his family will be OK once he dies
- He goes on a drug-bust with his DEA agent brother-in-law and comes across a former student of his
- He gets in touch with said student, Jesse Pinkman, and starts a meth business with him
Entire Show in One Scene

- [http://youtu.be/-d23GS56HjQ](http://youtu.be/-d23GS56HjQ)
- Chemistry is the study of change: it is growth then decay then transformation
- Walter is the one calling the shots, the guy who makes all of the decisions and he is the one in control
- Which kind of autonomous character is he?
- As he develops, he becomes more and more autonomous
The Various Autonomies & Moral Worth

Four concepts of autonomy are ruled out for an agent to be morally praiseworthy or blameworthy:
1. The agent does not need to possess heroic autonomy
2. The agent does not need to be independent in the sense of having the ability to get along in the world without help from others in order to be legitimately open to praise or blame
3. The agent does not need to have an independent mind
4. The agent does not need to be fortunate enough to have her normative autonomy violate
What’s Left?

1. Self-control/agent autonomy
2. Reason responsiveness
3. Authenticity
4. Identification with one's actions
Identification

Alienation:

- Does not correlate with lack of self-control
- Connection between alienation and moral responsibility?
  - Feeling alienated does not correlate with lack of moral responsibility or with variations in praiseworthiness or blameworthiness
- Criminals tend to say they were outside themselves when committing the crime
  - Ex. Oliver Single
- Just because someone feels alienated from something of their own does not mean it's not their own
  - Ex. Woman's fat thighs
- It seems natural that someone who performs an action that strikes him as unusual/alarming/inexplicable would see it as not his own
  - This does not exempt him from moral responsibility
Reason Responsiveness

Includes “extent to which the morally relevant features of the situation motivate the agent and... the extent to which the agent cares about the morally relevant considerations” (131)

- Responsiveness to reasons is important for moral responsibility because:
  - Praiseworthiness and blameworthiness depend on one's reasons for actions
  - Those not acting for reasons cannot be morally praiseworthy or blameworthy
    - Ex. Person with Tourette's swearing
Who cannot be morally praise- or blameworthy?

- Can only be morally blameworthy for actions, not for bodily movements
- Cannot blame or praise a creature that cannot be expected to perceive the morally relevant features of situations
  - Ex. A severely autistic person
What is an agent’s praise- or blameworthiness based on?

- Praiseworthiness depends on the depth of his moral concern
- Blameworthiness depends on the depth of sinister motivation or on the degree of indifference to moral factors
  - Reasons the agent is acting for
  - How much his action, for those reasons, reflects who he is
Return to Walter White

- Does Walter identify with his actions?
- Walter acts for one very important reason: family
  - He can be evaluated for praiseworthiness/blameworthiness
- As Walter becomes Heisenberg, he becomes much less praiseworthy and a lot more blameworthy
- At the end of the show, admits he stayed in business because he enjoyed it
Agent Autonomous Action, Human Action Par Excellence, and Action Simpliciter

Agent autonomy not as important to moral responsibility as is generally assumed
  - Not directly morally responsible only for agent autonomous actions
  - Not only agent autonomous action is blameworthy or praiseworthy
Is action possible in the absence of agent autonomy?

- Theories of action vs. theories of agent autonomy
- Suggested that best theory of action is one of agent autonomy
  - Agent autonomy necessary for any action
  - Agent autonomy necessary condition for praiseworthy or blameworthy actions
  - Cannot act without agent autonomy
Raising your voice in anger at a friend on the phone despite attempts to control yourself and be polite

- Shouting because you unconsciously want to end the friendship
- Shout at friend "in spite of yourself"
- Feel alienated from shouting, failed in self control
- Feel guilty for action afterwards
- Despite good reasons to end the friendship, still believe that you could have been more polite
Distinction in Language

- If autonomy is self control, was not acting autonomously in shouting
- Either you are not *acting* at all or that *you* are not acting at all
  - Your shouting was not an action or it was your resentment acting, not you
  - Important to determine which of the two uses of language are relevant
Frankfurt’s Iliad Example

- Agamemnon ceases to exist after his tragic choice
  - Could say that a sense of him ceased to exist allowing for other senses in which he keeps existing
- Velleman points out Frankfurt's lack of clarity
Difference in Actions

- Velleman says: “the agent did not truly participate in the resentful shouting at the friend”
- We understand what Le Carre means when he says Oliver's arm reached for the phone unbidden
- There is a difference between me yelling at my friend and Bertrand Wooster purposefully insulting Lord Worplesdon with intentions of making him mad
- Does this difference mean that my yelling was not my action?
Mele’s Response

- No
- I participate in my action of yelling at my friend
- My yelling lacks some of the features of the ideal human action
- Yelling at my friend is not an instance of human agency par excellence
  - Actions that involve things like deliberation, self-control, and the like
  - Not to be confused with the familiar problem of action theory (the question of what makes something an action)
- My yelling at my friend is an unconscious action

- Divide is between human action par excellence and action simpliciter
Velleman’s Response

- My yelling at my friend is not my action according to "The Possibility of Practical Reason"
- “My yelling is intentional; it is the result of my beliefs, desires, and unconscious decisions, thus it deserves to be called a behavior and an activity. But, it is not an action.”
- His question: what’s the difference between a man raising an arm and a man's anger raising that man's arm?
- Divide is between action and activity
  - Nonhuman animals seem to only have activities
Why is the divide in actions important?

- It affects what actions we are morally responsible for
- Are we only responsible for what we do autonomously?
Arpaly’s View

- She agrees with Mele’s inclination
- Distinction between actions in general and human actions par excellence does not correspond to the distinction between movements in general and subset of movements for which we are directly praiseworthy or blameworthy
- We are directly praiseworthy or blameworthy for all our actions, whether they exemplify our distinctive powers of agent autonomy (of self-control, self government) or not
Arpaly’s Opponents

- Argues against autonomy theorists who believe that people are only directly morally responsible for autonomous actions.
- Does not argue with those who accept the claim that only persons are morally responsible and autonomy is an important part of being a person.
- Does not criticize the theorist that calls my yelling at a friend ‘un-autonomous’ (not an instance of human agency par excellence).
Argument against the claim that we are only responsible for autonomous actions

Did Huckleberry Finn act autonomously?

- His action lacked in autonomy
- His good deed did not exemplify self-control
  - His sense of "I just couldn't do it" is not an instance of self-control
  - He is not a person who does what he endorses
- Huck Finn lacks autonomy yet is praiseworthy
- “Prima facie, this suggests that agent autonomy is not necessary for legitimate direct description of praiseworthiness” (139)
Can someone be blamed for their non-autonomous actions?
Autonomy and Blame

People that take autonomy as a necessary condition for moral responsibility must recognize that *initially* we tend to blame others for _unaonomous action_

- Their actions are _unaonomous because:
  - They acted on a desire that they would not consider as a reason for action
  - Their desire conflicts with their plans
  - Upon reflection, they know this is a desire they should not follow
Autonomy-Theorists

- Autonomy theorists would agree that agents that act for these reasons are not entirely free from blame
  - The would hold the agent responsible for actions that the agent performs in a severely akratic and "ego-dystonic" manner
- In order to account for the blameworthiness of these individuals, autonomy-theorists say that un-autonomous actions are the result of a failure to exercise self-control, for which the agent is to blame
Issue With Autonomous-Theorists

● Then what is the agent directly blameworthy for?
● The agent took a course of autonomous, self-controlled actions that led to the un-autonomous actions
  o If the agent would have taken a different course of autonomous actions, they would have been able to resist the unautonomous action
● An agent can be blamed for autonomous actions that created or enhanced their character flaws
Which Actions are Blameworthy

● Someone that procrastinates:
  a. Not deleting the games from their computer
  b. Not buying a planner
  c. Taking too many responsibilities
● Adulterer:
  a. Accepting a dinner invitation while their spouse is out of town
  b. Supporting a friend during hard times
● But this is not all that we blame these agents for; we tend to blame them for the action itself
Therefore Blameworthy for...

- Must be that the agent working as hard as they can is not very hard after all
- The agent must be blameworthy for not performing character-building action
- This view requires that humans have an incredible amount of control over their characters
- Examples of fictitious characters are exceptions to the rule
  - A person’s character is not substantially self-made
Sinister Motives

- This category of cases places the agent at blame for having a certain desire that they do not necessarily act on
  - One is blameworthy for being motivated at all by such desires
- “I am utterly disgusted by Asian people but I am doing my best to control it”
- An agent that does everything they can to curb their sinister desire, but still acts on it is blameworthy two-fold: for the desire and the action
Walter to Blame?

- Heisenberg desires to be the best meth cook out there
- Walter is still an autonomous agent, but it is Heisenberg governing his desires and actions
- “Consenting adults want what they want. At least with me they’re getting exactly what they pay for.” -- Gale Boetticher talking to Walter White
- If an autonomous character had been using this statement as a reason for cooking meth, would they be blameworthy (assuming they are still a moral agent)?
Isn’t it Counterproductive?

- Won’t heaping blame on agents cause agents to not try and mend their ways
- If an agent knows their visceral desires are bad, tormenting them for their desires will be counterproductive
- This does not mean that because the inadvertent sinner is blameworthy we should punish them, even verbally
Autonomy and Praise

- Arpaly does not mention praise; how does autonomy relate to praise?
- Is praise even possible with autonomy?
- Arpaly mentioned that your autonomous actions lead you to an eventual un-autonomous action, and the only way to correct this is through more autonomous actions and character improvement.
- But if you are travelling through this constant cycle, at what point do you stop and assess for blame or praise?
Brute Beasts

- Arpaly has an entire section discussing how animals are not autonomous agents so they have no moral responsibility.
- Animals do not have any reflective ability, so they cannot be held responsible for their actions.
- Arpaly consents that she does not give a complete account of what makes humans separate from other animals in regards to moral responsibility.
  - There could be many reasons, other than the one we identify: autonomy.