

## Dissertation Abstract

‘It’s my life and I’ll do what I want’: The value of autonomy

Daniel Groll

University of Chicago

May 19, 2009

In a few days time, my first child will come into the world. It will come as no surprise, then, that of late I have been thinking about the kind of life I would like my child to have; not, of course, for my sake, but for hers.<sup>1</sup> In other words, I am thinking about what is required for my child to lead a life that goes well for her. One thing I hope for, like all parents I suspect, is that my child go after things that are worth going after. Of course, reasonable people will disagree about just what those things are. The general thought, though, is surely shared: part of what it is for a life to go well for the person living it is to pursue things that merit pursuit.

But apart from this point about the kinds of things I want my child to pursue, there is a different point about *how* I want her to pursue them. And here, I picture a life that is, for lack of a better term, *self-directed*. I want my child to go after things that she takes to be important, that reflect her conception of what matters in life. Another way of putting this is that I want my child to enjoy a certain kind of independence: independence from the general culture around her and from those in her life (including her parents) in coming to develop her *own* conception of living

---

<sup>1</sup>The gender is still unknown. But I will use female pronouns.

well. Put metaphorically, I want her to set her own path through life, to be the author of her life, to be, to put it in slightly more technical terms, *autonomous*. Now this is, as yet, a vague desire since it is not clear what being autonomous involves. Nonetheless, we can easily recognize the broad idea I am after here. My wanting my child to be autonomous involves the thought that she play a central role in determining how her life should go.

A good portion of this dissertation is devoted to unpacking this idea, but the rough idea is clear enough: being autonomous involves having, and making, significant choices about the shape of one's life; being free from undue interference by others or the world in aiming to realize one's conception of how to live; being able to exercise one's capacity for agency in significant ways; and not simply following the masses, or authority figures, in coming to decide what is important in one's life, but rather thinking things through for oneself.

This dissertation is about the conviction that part of what it is for one's life to go well is for it be autonomous. My aim, roughly, is to explain why this is true. It is only 'roughly' my aim because my goal is not to convince someone who does not think that being autonomous is part of living well that it, in fact, is. Rather, I take the conviction that being autonomous is central living well as the starting point and ask the following: If autonomy is central to living well, why is this so? Someone who thinks that a life that is largely non-autonomous, that is dictated almost entirely by authority figures or simply lived in uncritical conformity with one's culture, will find little (although not nothing) to convince her otherwise in what follows. In this way, the scope of my project is limited. Nonetheless, it retains a broad interest inasmuch as a commitment to the value of autonomy is evinced in the beliefs and practices of many, if not most, citizens of liberal democracies; in the institutions and practices

that govern a significant portion of our lives; and in the work of liberal theorists and ethicists, particularly those concerned with applied issues in medicine.

Just what is the place of autonomy in a good life such that we generally think that people should lead their own lives even if they are likely to make poor choices? Why wouldn't it better for people to follow the lead of those who have a better sense of what is good for them? To be clear, I am not suggesting that there is no good answer here: one central goal of the dissertation is to show that there is. Moreover, I take it as a demand of an adequate conception of autonomy's place in living well that it be able to answer these questions – a conception of autonomy's value that suggested that, on the whole, it is not important that people lead autonomous lives, or that in general, we ought not let people lead their own lives when we are convinced they will lead them poorly, is *thereby* inadequate. In other words, an adequate conception of autonomy's value must meet what I call *the Demand*. So when I talk about the puzzling role that autonomy plays in our conception of living well or, more broadly, *the puzzle of autonomy*, this is not meant to be a challenge to the idea that autonomy should play such a role. Rather, it is simply to highlight that it is no way obvious why autonomy should play the role it does. In this way, my project is decidedly not revisionary: it seeks to explain, rather than subvert, our common sense conviction that people should lead their own lives for better or worse.

## 1 Dissertation outline

After setting up the basic issue in the introduction, I distinguish between three kinds of autonomy in **chapter 1**: autonomy of agency, jurisdictional autonomy and critical autonomy. Autonomy of agency is just the kind of freedom we enjoy as agents –

calling someone autonomous in this sense serves to distinguish him from a creature, or thing, that is not an agent. Jurisdictional autonomy is a social property of agents – it consists of having authority over particular jurisdictions or domains of choice. Critical autonomy consists of exercising independence of mind with regards to ones projects, goals and commitments. In this way, critical autonomy goes beyond the first two kinds of autonomy in that someone may enjoy autonomy of agency and jurisdictional autonomy but lack critical autonomy to a large degree. The person with critical autonomy stands in contrast to someone with a slavish or conformist personality, the person whose mode of life, to borrow from Mill, is one of ‘ape-like...imitation.’ My dissertation aims to give an account of the contribution of critical autonomy to well-being. It aims to tell us why it is good for people to exercise independence of mind in determining the course of their lives.

In **chapter 2**, I use Mill’s discussion of his harm principle to get at the two accounts philosophers have typically offered regarding the contribution of critical autonomy to well-being and argue that there is room for a largely ignored, third possible position. According to the first account, which I call instrumentalism, autonomy is valuable merely as a means to well-being, or some constituent thereof. The value of autonomy, according to this view, depends on the worth of the consequences that come from acting autonomously. The second view, which I call independecism, maintains that being autonomous is an independent constituent of living well; one’s life is made better in virtue of being autonomous whatever else is true of it. In other words, independecism maintains that autonomy constitutively contributes to well-being independent of how it is exercised. I discuss two contemporary versions of independecism: Martha Nussbaum’s claims about conscience and practical reason found in her ‘capabilities approach’ and her more recent work on

liberty of conscience; and Richard Kraut's 'developmentalism.'

In the second part of chapter 2, I employ the insights of Tom Hurka, Shelly Kagan and Christine Korsgaard on the nature of value to argue that there is a third possible account of autonomy's contribution to well-being which, with one notable exception (Joseph Raz, whom I discuss below), has been completely overlooked. According to this 'third way', autonomy is non-instrumentally, but nonetheless dependently, valuable. I argue, in other words, that autonomy is a constituent of well-being only on the condition that some other element of well-being is in place. That element, I maintain, is the pursuit of the good. As such, my claim is that autonomy constitutively contributes to well-being only when it is exercised in pursuit of the good. Otherwise it contributes nothing to, or may even detract from, well-being.

In chapter 3, I develop the key ingredients of my position and construct an initial argument for its plausibility. More specifically, I develop a precise conception of 'pursuit of the good', which I call a *hybrid* conception inasmuch as it combines what we might call intensional and extensional constraints on what counts as pursuing the good. That is, the notion of pursuing the good that is at the heart of my claim demands that an agent 1) pursue what is actually good, and 2) do so knowingly. Amongst other things, this conception of pursuit of the good leads to what I hope is the independently interesting conclusion that, due to the nested nature of ends, there is no straightforward answer to the question of whether someone is pursuing the good. This discussion also deals with the broader question, which is central to work in liberal political theory, of when two people with differing comprehensive commitments can nonetheless be said to share commitments, and so both be pursuing the good given a particular specification of their ends.

With this conception of pursuit of the good in hand, I argue that it is highly

plausible to think that autonomously pursuing the constitutively contributes to well-being and that it does so in a particularly, and distinctly, valuable way. The basic idea here is that there is an essential, and distinctive, connection between autonomy and character: one partly constitutes the nature and worth of one's character through one's autonomous pursuits. Consequently, insofar as one autonomously pursues the good, one constitutes one's character as good, which is part of living well. In showing how this is true, I discharge a part of my argumentative duty, for in showing that autonomy constitutively contributes to well-being when exercised in pursuit of the good, I show that autonomy has more than merely instrumental value. As such, instrumentalism is shown to be false.

The rest of my argumentative duty is discharged in **chapter 4**, where I show that, *contra* independecism, autonomy constitutively contributes to well-being *only* when exercised in pursuit of the good. There are two parts to this argument. The first part involves a burden-shifting argument: I argue that a clear understanding of the nature of autonomy clearly shows why autonomous pursuit of the bad constitutively detracts from well-being (in virtue of the pursuit being autonomous), and leaves mysterious, or at least *ad hoc*, the conviction that it also constitutively contributes to well-being. As such, absent a further, novel argument, we have no reason to think that autonomy constitutively contributes to well-being when exercised in pursuit of the bad.

The second step in the argument shows that my view can meet *the Demand* at least as well as independecism. I begin by distinguishing between two conceptions of *the Demand*, which I use to construct a dilemma for the independecist. For, while my position is impotent to meet *the Demand* on one conception of it, so too, I argue, is any plausible conception of independecism. And while independecism

can adequately meet *the Demand*, on the second conception of it, so too, I argue, can my position. As such, independence and my position are equally well-poised to meet *the Demand*.

I argue that if we conceive of *the Demand* as a demand to explain why we have (or ought to have) a *general policy* against what call autonomy reducing paternalism, then my account can meet it, in part by borrowing from the insights of instrumentalism. But, I argue, my position is preferable to instrumentalism inasmuch as it supports the idea that, no matter what the outcome, there is an inherent loss in someone failing to be, or exercise, her autonomy. This is because, other things being equal, the best life involves autonomy and so lives without it, even if only in particular instances, are lamentable. Of course, independence can also capture the idea that there is always, and everywhere, something lamentable in acts of autonomy reducing paternalism. But given that in the first part of the chapter I have shown that we have independent reason to doubt the truth of independence, I conclude that we have every reason to accept my position over independence given my view's ability to meet *the Demand*.

In **Appendix A**, I consider Joseph Raz's account of autonomy's value in *The Morality of Freedom*. Raz's view and my own share the basic idea that autonomy's value depends on the value of what one pursues. I explain how Raz's theoretical apparatus for arriving at our somewhat similar conclusion is very different from my own and I argue that my view offers a more compelling and less contingent account of autonomy's value. In particular, I show that Raz fails to provide adequate support of either of his two main theses, *viz.* that autonomy 1) contributes to well-being only when exercised in pursuit of the good; and 2) is a central constituent of well-being for citizens in what Raz calls an 'autonomy supporting environment.' The

discussion here involves an extensive look at Raz's subtle and intriguing ideas about the connection between morality and well-being, which, I hope is of independent interest to moral and political philosophers.

Finally, in **Appendix B**, I develop and defend a novel conception of paternalism against more standard conceptions. There is widespread agreement that part of what makes an action paternalistic is that the purported paternalist, call her *A*, intends to act for the good of the purported paternalized subject, *B*. But this is clearly not sufficient to render *A*'s action paternalistic – perhaps *A* only acts at *B*'s request. Something more is required: *A*'s action must stand in a particular relationship to *B*'s will. But what is the nature of this relationship? I argue that several standard accounts (offered by Gerald Dworkin, David Archard and Joel Feinberg, respectively) fail to capture this relationship. As a result, they cannot account for actions that are intuitively paternalistic. I propose my own view according to which *A* acts paternalistically toward *B* when *A*, intending to act for *B*'s good, does not treat *B*'s will as *decisive* in determining what to do. I distinguish between two senses in which *A* can fail to treat *B*'s will as decisive and argue that one – which I call *structural* decisiveness – is central to defining paternalism. This conception of paternalism, I claim, enables us to capture cases that the other accounts do not, while also providing a more compelling account of what makes paternalistic actions lamentable (though not necessarily blameworthy).

My account of paternalism is closely to my account, in chapter 4, of how it is that my conception of autonomy's value can meet *the Demand*. This is because I explain the (usually negative) normative significance of paternalism in terms of the good that is lost from preventing people from exercising their capacity to lead their own lives, even if, all things considered one is justified in doing so, and indeed, has



no other (plausible) option because of the structure of the situation. The upshot, familiar from chapter 4, is that paternalism is always, and everywhere, lamentable, even if often justified. In others words, paternalism is, by its nature, *lamentable* – it represents a falling away from what we take to be the best, or ideal, situation. We can, then, accept that there are situations where there is nothing blameworthy (presumptively or otherwise) about acting paternalistically while simultaneously acknowledging that things are not as they ideally should be. This is because, other things being equal, the best life is an autonomous life.