



Autonomy, Moral Status, and Biomedical Ethics by Caitlyn Otaguro

Abstract

Autonomy is a widely applied, yet heavily debated concept. This paper will provide background on the four main conceptions of autonomy: coherentism, reasons-responsiveness, responsiveness-to-reasoning, and incoherentism. These theories characterize an autonomous agent as one with a specific quality or mindset, such as one who endorses one's actions, has the capacity to reason, or has independence from external influences. This paper argues that autonomy is best defined by a set of criteria, rather than by a single requirement. For an agent to be autonomous, they must have self-respect, awareness of all their options, and freedom from being explicitly coerced into action. In order to further address the complexity of autonomy and the different factors that can affect it, autonomy must be considered a trait that comes in degrees, rather than an all-or-nothing condition.

As a result of this new definition, the relationship between autonomy and moral status must be reevaluated. It is widely believed that if an agent is autonomous, they should have moral status: the right to be treated as an individual rather than as a tool for another purpose. However, in light of this new definition of autonomy, their relationship becomes controversial. If only those with autonomy have moral status, then no species other than human beings would have it. Therefore, moral status must be restructured to be separate from autonomy. By examining the hypothetical practice of harvesting organs from 'bodyoids', genetically engineered, non-sentient human beings, we review the questions that must be answered before moral status can be defined, thereby laying the foundation to preserve the rights of living things.

Introduction

The concept of autonomy is used in many different fields, such as law, medicine, and philosophy, but there is no agreed upon way of defining the term. This is an issue because autonomy is often used as a precursor in determining one's rights and responsibilities, as well as other democratic structures (Nelson, 1992). For example, in a biomedical situation, it could be argued that because a person is autonomous, they have the right to choose whether or not to be euthanized. Therefore, if we lack a proper definition of autonomy, we create grey areas in which peoples' rights may be abused.

Autonomy is widely believed to be an extension of self-governance; by acting autonomously, an agent demonstrates the ability to control their actions (Buss & Westlund, 2018). When one has control over one's actions, one acts on motives or values that are one's own. So, it would follow that if someone *isn't* acting on reasons that are their own, then they don't have control over their actions, and thus lack autonomy. This line of reasoning prompts possibly the most significant question in the domain of autonomy: how does one determine if one's motives are truly one's own?

Coherentism

Under the coherentist conception of autonomy, an agent governs themselves when their motivation to act is coherent with a mental state that represents their point of view of that action (Buss & Westlund, 2018). According to Buss and Westlund, that mental state(s) can be their long-term goal(s), their emotional state, their character trait(s), or anything else that constitutes an agent endorsing their actions. Essentially, if one endorses one's actions, according to the coherentist, then one has autonomy. However, due to the theory's lack of attention to *how* a mental state comes about, the coherentist framework is a weak way of defining autonomy, demonstrated by several scenarios.

Imagine someone so overcome by addiction that they can't help but crave a certain drug; their emotional dependency on that drug would be coherent with the action of taking the drug, so a coherentist would consider them autonomous, despite their lack of control. Or consider a young woman indoctrinated in a way that forces her to accept an oppressive set of norms, stripping her of her rights. Her belief about her role in society may be coherent with her actions, but in these types of scenarios, stating that an agent is autonomous when their mental state arguably didn't originate with them is counterintuitive.

The addict can't change their emotional dependency on the drug, and the young woman can't free herself from the oppressive societal norms. When one is manipulated to think a certain way, through means such as addiction or indoctrination, their motives are arguably not their own. This violates the fundamental description of what autonomy is: control over one's actions through reasons that are one's own. So, if someone is addicted or indoctrinated in a way that prevents them from thinking to the contrary, even if their mental state is coherent with their actions, they definitionally cannot be considered autonomous. For an action to be autonomous, an agent's motivation must be authentic, meaning that the motivation must belong to the agent rather than be imposed by an external force (Christman, 2020). This suggests that coherence between an agent's mental state and their actions is irrelevant; there must be constraints in place to define what constitutes an authentic motivation.

Reasons-Responsiveness

The second conception of autonomy, reasons-responsiveness, tries to form these constraints by defining an authentic motivation as one that is grounded in reason. The reasons-responsive theory argues that one governs oneself when one's actions come from a wide enough range of reasons for and against one's behavior (Buss & Westlund, 2018). If an agent is apathetic towards their actions or is incapable of being moved by reason, then their motives are illegitimate and thus non-autonomous. This conception places a strong emphasis on an agent's ability to respond in a cognitively-informed way, to external factors. The ability to process something going on, evaluate one's reasons for and against an action, and then perform the rational action is the sign of autonomy.

Therefore, under this conception, the issue with coherentism appears to be resolved; there are now constraints in place to prevent non-authentic motivations from being labeled as autonomous. In the instance of the addict, their motivation to act was prompted by a drug-induced impulse, rather than logical reasoning about the best course of action, therefore they would be considered non-autonomous, according to this framework. Likewise, the indoctrinated young woman would be considered non-autonomous, assuming her oppressors have limited her ability to think for herself, as is common for those that are indoctrinated.

The issue with this theory is that its reliance on critical thinking means that neither a gut decision nor a spur-of-the-moment action are autonomous choices. Consider the example of a student torn between studying for her test and going to a party. She knows that logically, the best action is to study, but she decides on a whim to go to the party, knowing she'll regret not studying. Under this conception of autonomy, the student would be considered non-autonomous, because she recognizes why her decision is poor, but is incapable of being moved by these reasons. Making bad decisions doesn't demonstrate a lack of autonomy; the decision was ultimately up to the student, even if it was poorly thought through. If this student lacks autonomy, there must be another reason why.

Responsiveness-to-Reasoning

The next theory, responsiveness-to-reasoning, is similar to the reasons-responsive conception of autonomy, but the key difference is that the former is predominantly internalist, while the latter is externalist. This framework focuses on higher-order attitudes and introspection, as opposed to externalist theories, which focus on external factors and how they affect the agent. Under the responsiveness-to-reasoning conception, an agent has autonomy if they can determine and adjust their motives based on their existing beliefs about both the world and themselves (Dworkin, 1988, as cited in Buss & Westlund, 2018). So, according to this theory, an authentic motivation is one that is formed through self reflection and active growth. So, if one's ability to reason or self reflect is undermined, then one lacks autonomy.

The main drawback of this theory is that it doesn't address the external influences that can affect a person's reasoning. This leads to issues with the theory's reliance on an autonomous agent having the ability to change their motives when faced with a reason to do so. Suppose an agent is raised with a certain religion, which influences the way that the agent lives their life (not in a way that explicitly forces them to act, but in a way that guides them with a set of morals or customs). Also assume that this agent has been given a choice in whether or not to adopt this religion. Being introduced to a particular way of thinking at a young age is a strong external influence that often becomes an integral part of who an agent becomes. If at some point in the agent's life, they are presented with a reason that disproves a belief of their religion, but they remain faithful to their religion, then they would be considered non-autonomous under this framework.

This is an issue because the decision to resist a change is still a decision made by the agent. The agent's choice to maintain their belief system doesn't demonstrate a lack of

autonomy; they are still being motivated by values that are their own, as it was their decision to adopt the religion. Although external influences, such as the set of customs one is raised with, can cloud an agent's ability to self-reflect or change, as long as it is *the agent's* decision to accept this inability, it is still an autonomous action.

Incompatibilism

The incompatibilist conception of autonomy is the most externalist of the four; this theory argues that if one's actions or beliefs can be completely explained by external forces, then one doesn't govern oneself (Kane, 1996; van Inwagen, 1983, as cited in Buss & Westlund, 2018). This follows the same line of reasoning as the example of the addict whose action of taking a drug is non-autonomous, due to the motivation for the action originating with an external force, namely, the addiction. However, the difficulty with this theory lies in evaluating the extent to which one's motivations are a result of external forces.

This conception of autonomy is reasonable when one considers drastic circumstances, such as those of the addict. It becomes increasingly difficult, however, to categorize an agent as autonomous or non-autonomous under this theory in less stark cases. While we are all unavoidably shaped by our environments, it is impossible to tell, in mundane cases, whether or not those environments have shaped us completely, or if they have just influenced us. For all we know, we may *all* be complete results of external factors. So, while the incompatibilist theory isn't innately flawed, we should restructure the concept of autonomy around the idea that we may not actually have the ability to control our actions.

Autonomy must be an attainable trait to preserve the term's usefulness. Remember that many rights and responsibilities stem from autonomy; if autonomy is unattainable, then there would need to be a new way of assigning those rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, without an attainable definition of autonomy, agents may not respect their ability to make decisions, potentially leading to a nihilistic mindset. When one knows something is unattainable, one doesn't strive for it, which may lead to a loss of motivation and a gradual decay of the engagement that keeps society moving.

Discussion

There must be another way to define how motivation and autonomy are linked. Autonomy can't result from unrealistic circumstances, such as an environment completely separate from the world's influence, creating agents who think through every minor decision, free from any bias or flaws in logic; we must consider a definition of autonomy that takes this impracticality into consideration.

I propose that regardless of the external factors that may affect someone, if they have self-respect, awareness of all their options, and freedom from being explicitly coerced into action, then they have autonomy. Benson defines a sense of self-worth as a requirement for "regarding oneself as being competent to answer for one's conduct" (Benson, 1994, as cited in

Stoljar, 2013). When one respects oneself, one decides that one is worthy of a position of decision making.

Essentially, an agent's actions are their own when *they* consider their actions their own. This definition excludes scenarios of vacillation. For example, a man gets into a fight with his friend and at first, he stands by his actions, but later, he is embarrassed by his conduct. Despite his change in opinion of his actions, as long as he was in a state of self respect *during* the moment of action, and was free from explicit coercion, then he was acting autonomously.

Recall the example of the young woman indoctrinated into an oppressive set of norms; her acceptance of a state of inferiority shows that either her sense of self-respect has been damaged, or she doesn't know of any other way to live. Or, if this woman was forced to act a certain way through threats of violence, for example, then she would lack autonomy as well. In the instance of the addict, assuming their addiction causes them physical and/or emotional harm, then they demonstrate a lack of sufficient self-respect. This goes on the assumption that with a sense of self-respect comes a sense of self-preservation and a goal of physical and emotional health.

Now, let's consider a more difficult scenario. Take the previous example of a student who makes the poor decision to go to a party instead of studying. This girl can't be labeled as autonomous or non-autonomous without more information. If she knows that the resulting low score will cause her lasting emotional damage, yet chooses to go to the party because peer pressure has diminished her sense of individual self worth, then she lacks autonomy. However, if her decision comes from an instinctual feeling that the emotional benefit of having fun at the party will, in the long run, outweigh the regret she'll feel from not studying, then she is autonomous. Within every instance, there are many factors that can affect an agent's autonomy, which is why autonomy isn't an all-or-nothing characteristic; it comes in a spectrum.

As many feminist perspectives of autonomy assert, conceptions of autonomy shouldn't "homogenize" agents (Meyers, 2000, as cited in Stoljar, 2013). In other words, different circumstances must be taken into consideration when defining autonomy. A student with a diminished sense of self respect from peer pressure still has a greater capacity for autonomous agency than a woman in an oppressive society. Imagine a student facing harsh beauty standards, who feels like she *has* to wear makeup every day. Her reduced self respect, as well as her feeling that she has no other option, shows that her autonomy is reduced in this respect. Compare this student with a girl whose self expression is controlled and whose life path is dictated for her; both girls have restricted autonomy, but certainly not to the same extent. This is because an agent can lack autonomy in one area, while still maintaining it in another. The student has diminished autonomy in her ability to express herself, but overall, she is still autonomous, assuming that she has autonomy in most other respects.

This spectrum is hard to create exact criteria for. One may be anywhere on the spectrum: highly autonomous, slightly autonomous, moderately non-autonomous, fully non-autonomous. Within the context of real life, no two people have the exact same set of circumstances, therefore no two people have the same level of autonomy. A reduced amount of self respect

does not have the same impact as being physically forced into an action, and levels of self respect vary in each person. Ultimately, one can't look at a person and determine whether or not they have autonomy, one can only examine a person's actions and determine whether or not they *acted* autonomously. These actions, put together, create a greater understanding of the extent to which the agent is autonomous, giving them their place on the spectrum.

Moral responsibility is considered to stem from autonomy; when an agent acts autonomously, then they must be responsible for their actions. If, under my theory, someone without a sense of self respect has limited autonomy, then it would follow that someone without self respect wouldn't have any moral responsibility, either. This is controversial, because intuitively, a person shouldn't be excused from a morally reprehensible act, such as murder, just because of a lack of self respect.

This objection can be addressed by reevaluating the relationship between autonomy and responsibility; perhaps responsibility isn't determined by autonomy alone, but by other factors, like intentional action. If an agent intentionally commits a murder, then they may be held morally responsible, even if their autonomy is restricted by a lack of self respect. However, if an agent has no autonomy at all (for example, if they're forced at gunpoint to kill another), then even if the act is intentional, they cannot be held responsible. Intentionality only comes into play when autonomy is *limited*, not outright revoked. The existence of judges and juries capable of tailoring punishments to fit individual circumstances also reflects the spectrum of autonomy. The more autonomously or intentionally an agent is acting, the more morally responsible they are to be held.

The intentionality argument includes instances of negligence. For example, a chemist unintentionally creates a product that causes cancer in its users. She didn't *intentionally* harm anyone, but she is still morally responsible due to her negligence. One way of thinking about negligence is as an intentional omission of an action. The chemist knew that she was working with materials that had the potential to cause harm to others, but she didn't take the proper safety precautions. By intentionally omitting the act of forethought, she is intentionally causing harm to others. If, on the other hand, it were a very young child meddling with the chemicals, without knowing anything about the potential harm their actions might cause, then they would *not* be considered morally responsible. This is because the child didn't intentionally omit any precautions; it was a fully unintentional act.

Implications for Moral Status

The question of autonomy plays a significant role in several fields, such as law, politics, engineering, and bioethics, which not only take autonomy into consideration, but apply the concept of moral status as well. A being with moral status deserves to be treated as an individual with its own interests, rather than as a tool for another purpose (Nelson, 1992). Moral status is commonly thought to be inextricable from autonomy (Wasserman et al., 2012). However, no matter how you define autonomy, almost all non-human creatures don't have autonomy, or at least don't have it to a significant degree. Rabbits, for example, don't have

advanced reasoning, capacity for self-reflection, or articulated self-respect, yet they deserve to be treated with dignity. Additionally, if only those with autonomy have moral status, do humans without autonomy lack moral status as well? The correlation between autonomy and moral status is especially controversial if autonomy comes in a spectrum- how would you treat a creature with *some* moral status? Moral status must be a trait separate from autonomy, requiring its own set of qualifications.

I believe that all sentient beings deserve moral status. There is no universally accepted definition of sentience, but generally speaking, a sentient being is one that can feel pleasure or pain, perceive its environment, and form conscious feelings (Proctor et al., 2013). This means that most species of living things have moral status, with the exception of bacteria and some invertebrates. It is important to note that there are some species whose sentience is debated, such as fruit flies or flatworms. I propose that any species whose sentience is unknown should be treated as if they have moral status, until they can be proven to be non-sentient, in order to prevent unintended harm. However, beings without sentience may or may not qualify for moral status as well. The current conception of moral status is highly inconsistent, as a result of sentimentality and human bias. To better understand this, we must examine the controversy behind 'bodyoids'.

The Moral Status of 'Bodyoids'

'Bodyoids' are a purely hypothetical concept: human bodies altered and artificially grown, lacking the neural components that make consciousness or a sense of pain possible (Charlesworth et al., 2025, as cited in Rodger et al., 2025). This would allow biologists to produce human organs, in order to address the organ shortage. Given the scientific and biological limitations involved, bodyoids are highly unfeasible. Even if ectogenesis were possible, it seems very unlikely that a creature could develop without any neural structures, given the role that developing brains play in organ development (Rodger, et al., 2025). It is nevertheless beneficial to examine this hypothetical, because it sheds light on an interesting inconsistency.

If bodyoids lack consciousness and are incapable of feeling pain, then they aren't sentient, and do not have moral status. A majority of people most likely wouldn't object to this assertion, for the same reason that most people don't object to breaking a twig or kicking a rock. If something is incapable of feeling emotional or physical harm, and is unable to *ever* do so, it isn't evident why harming it is wrong. It is only when we introduce sentimentality to the equation that strong objections arise. For example, if we were to state that a person with unresponsive wakefulness syndrome does not have moral status, there would be a very different reaction. A person with unresponsive wakefulness syndrome (UWS), historically referred to as someone in a vegetative state, is defined as "an organic body capable of growth and development but devoid of sensation and thought" (Riganello et al., 2016). This means that someone with UWS wouldn't have moral status, for the same reason that a bodyoid doesn't have moral status. But intuitively, it isn't right to harvest the organs from a person with UWS.

I believe that bias is the reason denying moral status to a human with this condition elicits such a strong revulsion. It's easier for a person to empathize with someone more similar to them, and when one can empathize with another, one is more likely to treat them with a higher degree of respect. For example, people think that if *they* had UWS, they wouldn't want *their* moral status to be revoked, so they give others the same grace. There is also a relational aspect to this bias; the friends and family of a person with UWS wouldn't want harm to come to that person, even if that person cannot feel or think.

If a non-sentient human has moral status because of their bond with their family, then the problem with harming that being may come from the emotional harm it would cause to the family, rather than the harm it would cause to the non-sentient human. However, if bonds between a sentient and a non-sentient being are enough to grant the non-sentient being moral status, then what about a child with a strong emotional attachment to a stuffed animal? If, for some reason, that stuffed animal could be traded to save a human's life, would it still be morally wrong to take the stuffed animal away from the child? We can extend this line of reasoning to a person with UWS; if that person does not have sentience, and that person's life could be traded to save a sentient human's life, why is it, as many would no doubt attest, morally wrong to make that trade?

One could argue that it's morally wrong to trade the life of a person with UWS, while *not* morally wrong to trade the stuffed animal, because the former is living while the latter is not. But if neither can feel pleasure or pain, perceive its environment, or form conscious feelings, why does the status of "living" matter? Bacteria are living beings, but their moral status has never been respected. This remains an area of open debate and inquiry, suggesting several of the many questions that must be answered before moral status can be adequately defined.

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