

Autonomy: A Social Perspective

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Abstract. There is an interesting debate in contemporary philosophy on the notion of “personal autonomy”, that has a trans-disciplinary character. My contribution shows several perspectives and points on those that propose to overcome “individualism” to favor social aspects. It is important to highlight the connection between language use and autonomy to sketch a plausible social model.

1 INTRODUCTION

The debate on autonomy is very lively in different fields. There are therefore many conceptual distinctions worthy of consideration. For the sake of my discussion, the most important distinction is between “moral” autonomy and “personal” autonomy. Generally speaking, the theorists of personal autonomy I’ll consider in my contribution try to give an account of autonomy conceived not only as moral agency. There are also interesting ideas coming from contemporary social epistemology.

We can describe personal autonomy in “procedural” or in “substantive” terms. Procedural theories emphasize the structural conditions of the process of “identification” with one’s own motives. Even if these conditions are relevant, substantive theories rightly point on the role of the content of our reasons for autonomous agency. This perspective requires substantive standard according to which we can recognize and criticize oppressive norms. A critical stance is the goal of a plausible social epistemology, which presents several views about to consider knowledge coming from sources other than our own, namely “testimony”.

Starting from the work of Juergen Habermas there is a fundamental relationship between autonomy and “communicative action”. He interprets the Meadian concept of identity in pragmatic sense. Mead maintains that the formation of identity develops through the medium of linguistic communication. The process of socialization is a process of individualization based on an asymmetry between the perspectives of speaker and listener. The “self” is the identity of the socialized individual who has undertaken fundamental roles in a linguistic situation. According to Habermas, the performative attitude assumed by Ego and Alter in the communicative situation is bound to the presupposition that the interlocutor has the possibility of accepting or refusing the offer of a speech act.

Language offers a space of freedom that has important consequences for self-authorization and self-regard. “Taking ownership” for our actions does not presuppose fulfillment of the conditions settled by identity-based theories. Autonomy as self-governance must be thought in the light of normative, relational and discursive authorization (Benson, Oshana). The authors of the volume *Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning* (Murray Ed.) explore important traits of the notion of autonomy. Language learning shows plausible models to understand the ways in which autonomy is socially

mediated. Socially oriented perspectives (social constructivism, social-cultural theory, situated theory, ecology and complexity) concretely investigate the dimensions of learner autonomy.

My proposal is to show the normative requirements for autonomy. A social (intersubjective) model is promising if we consider socialization from the point of view of the process through which we develop the cognitive and moral capacities necessary for autonomy. We can apply the “scorekeeping” model (an original variant of the “Wittgensteinian “linguistic game”) proposed by Robert Brandom that offers the deontic structure of discursive practices in which agents have the possibility of exchange their reasons. If the agents have the chance to participate to fruitful and open dialogues, they have the opportunity to be exposed to different reasons, and, consequently, to reach the “autonomy point of view”, namely that point from which they can refuse or accept validity claims. The formal structure of the “autonomy point of view” is relational in two senses: (1) the semantic sense that shows the inferential commitments agents must acknowledge and (2) the “pragmatic” one that reveals the normative structure of that acknowledgment as a social net of deontic attitudes.

2 THE PROCEDURAL VIEW

Procedural theories consider the recognition of subjective motives for acting as successful when certain structural conditions of critical reflection are satisfied. These conditions are fulfilled when the identification of the agent with his own desires occurs. Harry Frankfurt introduced the hierarchical model: we are autonomous when we want, via our second-order volitions, that the content of desires of the first order realizes. For instance, a person may have a higher-order volition that her lower-level desire to drink water be fulfilled.

Generally speaking, procedural theories level autonomy and authenticity: an autonomous agent must be able to reflect and to accept (i.e. to identify herself with) her own desires, values, etc. The identification means that an agent possesses a volition, i.e. a second order desire, which allows the reflection on the first order desires being in competition. The process of identification presents two difficulties, which arise either in the case of the agent’s identification as recognition (without judgment) of an aspect of her personhood, or in the case of approving it. In the first case, the identification does not seem an indication of autonomy, because a person could identify, as part of her own self, coercive or imposed aspects of it. In the second case, the approval is a problematic requirement because perfectly authentic aspects of the self (for which one is fully responsible) exist, even though they are not totally approved (Thalberg, Friedman, Wolf, Christman).

Christman [1] focused on relevant aspects of the formation of beliefs, values and desires in the process of socialization. His analysis attempts to secure the autonomy of an agent’s higher order identifications and values by building certain historical constraints into the process of critical

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reflection. This account presents two fundamental virtues [2]. The first is the attention to the historical dimensions of reflection, showing how an agent may change her relation to (some of) her beliefs and values by coming to understand the processes by which they were acquired or developed. For instance, xenophobic beliefs and values may come to be seen in a new light, once the agent understands that they arose from limited exposure to other cultures in a childhood lived in small country towns. By Christman, the agent's earlier higher-order identification with xenophobic beliefs and values is shown to be non-autonomous once the agent understands and resists the historical processes that led to their formation and to her previous endorsement of them. The second virtue is the compatibilist explanation of the relationship between autonomy and socialization. As long as we do not, or would not resist the process we acquired our beliefs, desires, values, and higher-order identifications, then they are autonomous, even if we acquired them as a result of socialization.

3 THE "SUBSTANTIVE" VIEW

Theories based on authenticity refer to internal self-reflection and procedural independence; these options mean that they do not consider the role of the content of desires or preferences for the development of autonomy. Some philosophers maintain that an autonomous person must show not only procedural but also "substantial" independence, which rightly requires the consideration of the social context in which an action can be judged as autonomous (Stolijar, Benson, Oshana). Let's quote the following example Benson offers:

Consider the eighteen year-old college student who excels in her studies, is well-liked by her many friends and acquaintances, leads an active, challenging life, yet who regularly feels bad about herself because she does not have "the right look"...So, on top of everything else he does, she expends a great deal of time and money trying to straighten or curl her hair, to refine her cosmetic technique, to harden or soften her body, and so on [3].

According to Stolyar and Benson, we must observe that although the college student may have chosen to internalize a value something like girls ought to look a certain way if they are to count as worthwhile to society, the actions that arise from such value cannot be acts of autonomous agency because the value is oppressive in nature [4]. Procedural theories also in historical variants [5] underestimate the role of the internalization of oppressive norms; from a substantive point of view, even if the student has to some extent the option of choosing alternative values, it is the content of the norms he internalized that diminishes her autonomy.

In my opinion, Benson focuses on a fundamental point in order for understanding the normative source of autonomy. He addresses directly to the social and discursive dimension of "taking ownership" that explains how internalized invisibility (internalization of oppressive norms diminishing autonomy) can defeat agents capacity "to take ownership" of what they do. «The key to comprehending the significance of "reflexive", first person attitudes for autonomy lies in the active quality of agential ownership. Persons cannot acquire ownership of what they do, in the sense that pertains to autonomy, simply by finding themselves passively in the position of owners. This sort of ownership is necessarily active; we can have it only by taking it» [6].

The active dimension of taking ownership implies the capacity of the agent of giving reasons for her actions and so of responding to potential "challenges" arising in the social context from her own point of view. The active character of ownership can be clarified in three central points:

- (1) Claiming authority for ourselves as ones who are in a position to speak for our conduct is not a matter of deliberate action;

- (2) Self-authorization arises partly out of our self-regard and it transpires within the reach of our capabilities to reflect, decide and act.
- (3) Taking ownership of our actions is also a matter of taking responsibility and this active dimension could not be the result of deliberation.

I maintain that Benson's account rightly points to the social and discursive dimension of autonomy. This move gives the possibility of taking responsibility in a public context and implies also the possibility of speaking for people who are marginalized.

4 COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AND AUTONOMY

The Habermasian account of "communicative action" represents a good model to relate autonomy to a linguistic normative competence. According to Habermas, autonomy is bound to the acknowledgment of presuppositions or linguistic rules as conditions of universal validity of theoretical and practical claims. He plausibly introduced the issue of interpersonal recognition related to formal linguistic conditions of a rational and egalitarian dialog [7].

In my opinion Habermas account of the relationship between autonomy and socialization is convincing because it shows plausible arguments against the contemporary reductionist strategies. The criticism of Habermas is directed against those reductionist strategies, which consider individual freedom as an appearance because what is taken as "mental causality" would be a net of neuron conditions under the laws of nature. This idea is incompatible with the fact that normally we consider the others and ourselves as imputable because we are able to take responsibility for actions. It is also important to define a plausible concept of action. According to Habermas:«A Design that concentrates planning, decision and execution of a body movement in a restrict lapse of time by detaching it from each context of long term goals and motivate alternatives can grasp only artifact, which do not possess the intimate connection with what can transform actions into free actions: the intimate conception with reasons. It is a misunderstanding to see the freedom to act some way or other as embodied in the Buridan donkey. In the "nude" decision to stretch out the left or the right arm does not manifest itself freedom of action, as there is not contact with reasons as for instance the ones that motivate a cyclist to turn right or left» [8].

The concept of action involves the idea of a rationally motivated choice: the decision to act forms according to rules. The fact that reasons motivate actions entails the fundamental consequence that the process of judgment gives the agent the title to be considered as the author of a certain decision. In this sense, the constraint of the best argument that guides our choices is different from the causal constraint that forces us to act contrary to our will. Nevertheless, freedom ought to be thought as requiring constraints otherwise it is unthinkable. According to Habermas, the rational motivation by reasons can be explained only from the point of view of the participant to the game of giving and asking for reasons. This is an important observation because this game is not based on the primacy of rational consent. In this sense it lives open the possibility of an account of the agent autonomous point of view in the linguistic situation. We can argue for a concept of autonomy as an essential component of the self-realization of a subject living in a society that develops in communication, in intersubjective acknowledgement of commitments or validity claims. Language that we share gives us the possibility of being autonomous. The condition for being autonomous is to be intentionally bound by conceptual-linguistic rules that are not individual desires and preferences. An analysis of the concept of "liberty" needs investigations on individual motivations like desires and preferences. In this sense, we are free to act

according to our mean-end reasoning without the necessity to assume a detached, responsible perspective over personal desires and preferences.

The importance to participate in the “game of giving and asking for reasons” (to use Sellars’ metaphor) emerges in case of marginalization. Even if we are not so sure about the validity of our commitments, if we participate to public discussions we have the possibility to come to know and to inherit them. Moreover, if we have the chance to participate to fruitful and open dialogs, i.e. we are exposed to different reasons, we can reach an autonomous point of view namely that point from which we can accept or refuse validity claims.

5 AUTONOMY AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Several relevant authors of social epistemology think that the model for an ideal knower must be abandoned (see Hardwig, Welbourne, Schmitt, Baier, Webb, Goldman, Jones, Fricker, Faulkner, Lipton, Kusch, Lackey). These authors generally think that we cannot neglect ethical and social dimensions of inquiry. A strong view among social epistemologists is that an individual cannot be said to know, via testimony, that *p*, unless *p* is known in the community (see Welbourne, Brandom, Faulkner).

An interesting observation simply suggest that an epistemic agent whose beliefs do not depend upon testimonial transmission knows very little. So, we must consider our limitations and our need to economize. If we do not ignore these, autonomy will appear irrational for accepting a huge loss of information, ignoring how we exploit a division of epistemic labor (Putnam, Kitcher). We usefully divide roles in the kind of information we acquire and so can transmit, e.g., about world events, the weather, sports scores, which no one, nor any small group of us, could achieve on his or her own. Our reliance on the division of epistemic labor extends not just to the pronouncements of others better positioned, but to their reasons or evidence. Owens [9] offers the provocative thesis that when a speaker transmits the knowledge that *p* to a hearer, the hearer may be held to have borrowed the speaker’s reasons for *p*, without necessarily knowing their content. The worries over autonomy are forceful in cases in which there is reason not to fully trust the judgments of others. In a wide range of ordinary cases, however, it is evident that others, either singly or as a group, are bound to be more reliable than oneself and to report accurately. Consequently, it would be self-defeating to ignore, or to unfeasibly try to regularly check upon, their transmissions.

My proposal of a fruitful notion of autonomy is to adopt the scorekeeping model [10], based on the primacy of the performative attitude of the speaker so that we can grasp the know-how implied by the “social role” of the autonomous agent as “scorekeeper”, who participates in the game of giving and asking for reasons [11]. This social role is defined by the use of language bound to certain social attitudes (attributing and undertaking commitments and entitlements) through which the recognition of deontic statuses (commitments and entitlements) seems possible. Even if we accept the inferential structure (based on material incompatibility) of this space proposed by Wilfrid Sellars, we must also give an explanation of the social perspectives from which we can undertake and attribute commitments. I’ll propose the thesis that the autonomous agent occupies the social role of scorekeeper, thus she is able to justify and to take responsibility for her assertions (or the assertions of others). The normative competence of the autonomous agent is bound to the social structure of the space of reasons. In this context, we have two possibilities: (a) to rely to the recognition model presented by Brandom in his paper on the desire for recognition [12] or (b) to rely to a kind of linguistic normative competence described in scorekeeping terms. In my opinion, this latter possibility is worthy of consideration as it addresses to a wide concept of

justification of reasons for acting that does not require too strong conditions for autonomous agency.

(a) Let’s begin with the first possibility. Brandom maintains that recognition is fundamental to clarify the structure of the social space of reasons in which agents can freely express their points of view. Actually, the notion of recognition Brandom introduces focuses on identification of reasons one ought to recognize in communication. This fact means that the agents ought to understand that (1) they are responsible and entitled to commitments implied by assertions and actions, (2) also the others move from the same deontic structure and (3) without reciprocal recognition it is not possible to have a representation of oneself i.e. self-consciousness. Once we are conscious to have a self who expresses his/her voice in the reciprocal exchange of reasons we acquire a “robust” self-consciousness. The limit of this account is that autonomy is possible only by virtue of a shared background of objects and norms. We acquire autonomy only through self-consciousness as recognition of inferentially structured commitments that constitute the natural and the social worlds. Consequently, we fall into a form of dangerous relativism because we have only the possibility to recognize commitments of our own communities. In my opinion autonomy requires an explanation of critical reflection bound to an intersubjective discursive practice that favors a process of reciprocal comprehension among different forms of life.

(b) In this sense (second possibility), for an agent to be autonomous she ought to internalize the normative structure of a “dialogical” rationality. Here we are moving at the normative level of communication i.e. the level we consider as sufficient for autonomous agency. A self-transparent process of identification of shared commitments is not required for autonomy. The entitlement to a claim can be justified (1) by giving reasons for it, or (2) by referring to the authority of another agent, or (3) by demonstrating the capacity of the agent reliably to respond to environmental stimuli

6 CONCLUSION

In the present context, I would say that this analysis is compatible with Habermas account of autonomy in terms of theory of communicative action. Recognition of validity is not bound to identity recognition (Honneth) but on attributions of validity to speech acts. Thus the: «self of the practical relation-to-self reassures itself about itself through the recognition that its claims receive from an alter ego. But these identity claims aiming at intersubjective recognition must not be confused with the validity claims that the actor raises with his speech-acts. For the “no” with which the addressee rejects a speech-act offer concerns the validity of a particular utterance, not the identity of the speaker. The speaker certainly not count on the acceptance of his speech acts if he did not already presuppose that the addressee took him seriously as someone who could orient his action with validity claims. The one must have recognized the other as an accountable actor whenever he expects him to take a position with “yes” or “no” to his speech-acts offers. In communicative action everyone thus recognizes the other in his own autonomy.

Because of the participation in the game of giving and asking for reason, we can master the communicative structure of justification by “default” and “challenge”. Autonomy is relational in two senses: (1) the “semantic” sense that shows the inferential commitments (governed by material incompatibility) the agents must acknowledge and (2) the “pragmatic” sense that reveals the normative structure of that acknowledgment as a social net of deontic attitudes.

For example: which is the competence an agent must possess to be able to constitute an autonomous and critical voice in the public space? Let us consider a political question [13]: the case of a politician who is committed to the following action: «If the dissidents attack, I’ll respond to». From the point of view of the justification by default, *P* could refer to his/her

own knowledge of the norms that regulate war conflicts, or to the authority of others who are reliable. Naturally, this knowledge depends on the content of norms authorizing certain practical commitments. The fundamental trait of the scorekeeping model is that it represents a dynamic model, in which social practices are always exposed to the risk of dissent. In this context, social practices entail the dimension of “challenge”, i.e. the case in which the scorekeeper challenges the interlocutor to justify and eventually to repudiate his/her commitment. The speech acts implied by this critical role are: disavowals, queries and challenges. Even in the case in which an agent acquires the entitlement to act by deferral, i.e. by indicating a testimonial path whereby entitlement to act can be inherited, the query and the challenge assume the function of fostering P’s reflection. But if P can refer to the authority of a set of legal norms, it becomes difficult for the scorekeeper to alter the score of conversation. The disavowal is successful if the scorekeeper shows to P that his/her inference implies incompatible commitments from the subjective incompatibility perspective: for example that the response to the attack entails catastrophic consequences. In this case, P can be forced to perform a different inference such as: «If the dissidents attack, I’ll find a diplomatic solution».

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