

Autonomy and Social Attitudes

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Abstract. I'll follow a line of thought that suggests to intend "personal autonomy" in a social sense. The urgency to undertake this move arises because of the wide variety of informational sources we are exposed which influence our behavior. Social background represents the basis for autonomy; at the same time, interaction with others (real or virtual) enlarges the possibility for autonomous judgements. My attempt is to try to elucidate the connection between autonomy, knowledge by testimony and the exposition to informational diversity.

1 INTRODUCTION

The notion of "personal autonomy" defines those philosophical views that prefer to intend autonomy not only in a "moral sense". Moreover, my discussion does not concern the classical debate on free will (determinism/indeterminism). There are several theories of personal autonomy, that suggest to overcome the "individualistic" views (Giovagnoli 2007). Nevertheless, they are "social" in different senses, which I'll briefly describe.

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. Procedural personal autonomy requires the fulfillment of conditions for rationally deciding and acting, ranging over a wide spectrum of individual idiosyncratic desires and volitions (Dworkin, Frankfurt, Ekstrom). Several authors try to add "historical" conditions which examine the process of the formation of judgment or decision to act (Fisher, Ravizza, Christman). Very interesting and powerful are the substantive theories, that in the individual variant start from the Kantian inheritance (Korsgaard, Hills, Wolf).

My argument focuses on substantive views which consider the social contexts as sources of norms which favor or diminish development and exercise of the capacity for personal autonomy.

2 SOCIAL CONCEPTIONS OF 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. Differently from other theories of "recognition" (nota), he plausibly introduced the issue of "interpersonal recognition" related to formal linguistic conditions of a rational and egalitarian dialog [7]. Habermas account of the relationship between autonomy and socialization is convincing because it

shows plausible arguments against the contemporary reductionist strategies. Autonomy is directly bound to the notion of "communicative action", which, differently from instrumental and strategic action, aims at a rational consent. It is not only a question of an ideal point of view under procedural conditions (introduced from an external perspective), rather the development of the possibility for autonomy through communicative action is based on a well-known process of socialization explained also by reference to different disciplines (Piaget, Kohlberg).

To become an autonomous individual being, i.e. to become a self, means for Hegel in Brandom's interpretation (Brandom 1999) to take it or treat it as one by those that are taken or treated as ones by this very being. For the individual autonomy depends on the condition of being recognized as one simultaneously with recognizing the other (treating me as one) as one as well, the process may be called a *mutual recognition* (based on Hegel's *phenomenological viewpoint*). Under such a treatment the recognized one is fully ascribed the status of capability of being *responsible* and of *becoming a subject of commitments*. To reach such a status is the kind of *social achievement* that conditions the individual's autonomy. This would, however, sound too restrictive if we admit that one's autonomy depends strictly on the others' decision to ascribe her this kind of freedom. Therefore, there is one more condition that makes this definition sound less paradoxically constrained. Speaking of autonomy one shall also take to account the fact that the one's ability to take responsibility also means the one is entirely free to reject it. "According to the autonomy thesis, one is in a strict sense bound only by rules or laws one has laid down for oneself, norms one has oneself endorsed." (Brandom 1999)

Procedural theories [5] underestimate the role of the internalization of oppressive norms; from a substantive point of view, even if a person has to some extent the option of choosing alternative values, it is the content of the norms she internalized that diminishes her autonomy. We must consider the nature of values that come from the social context (Stolyar, Benson, Oshana among others). For instance, Benson focuses on a fundamental point in order to understand 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 [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. This move gives the agent the possibility of taking responsibility in a public context and also the possibility of speaking for people who are marginalized.

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3 AUTONOMY AND COMMUNITY

Several relevant authors in the field 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). The autonomy of individual reason become a chimere.

In Brandom's account of "recognition" in scorekeeping terms the possibility to undertake an autonomous perspective is bound to "deontic attitudes" and "deontic statuses". Recognition seems a fundamental requirement for an agent to be autonomous, but reciprocal recognition is possible by virtue of "shared commitments". Beside the basic form of "simple recognition" through which we recognize each other by virtue of our common intentionality toward natural environment, self-consciousness requires "robust" recognition. Simple recognition entails to have a conception of the self in a double sense. First, an agent recognizes herself as something as a self, i.e. as able differentially to respond to environmental stimuli moving from the satisfaction of basic desires (such as the attitude of "hunger"). Second, an agent must have a capacity for *recognition*. She must have a conception of the self as able to do what is required in order to be taking or treating something as a *self*, namely a subject of normative statuses of *authoritative* (in the sense of probative, though still provisional and defensible) *commitments* as to how things are. This second sense implies reflexivity, because the agent recognizes oneself among those who she recognizes. Starting from simple recognition, the agent can reach the dimension of "robust" recognition if she is disposed to acknowledge the simple recognitions of others and undertaking the consequent commitments by herself. In Brandom's terms: «Thus robust self-consciousness is achievable only through *reciprocal* recognition: being robustly recognized by at least some of those one robustly recognizes. This means that a *community* (a kind of universal) is implicitly constituted by one's own robust recognitions, and actually achieved insofar as they are reciprocated. That is the sort of reciprocally recognitive community within which alone genuine (robust) self-consciousness is possible: the "I" that is "We" and "We" that is "I"»³.

The result is that autonomy is not thinkable without shared knowledge and testimony is a fundamental source of knowledge. An interesting observation simply suggests that an epistemic agent whose beliefs does 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).

4 HOW TO AVOID THE PARADOXICAL CONSTRAINT OF AUTONOMY

As was remarked, Brandom assesses on the so-called *autonomy thesis* developed by Kant based on his Rousseau

reading (Brandom 1999). On the one hand, there is the *authority* of the others' over me that is, on the other hand, constrained by my acknowledgement of this authority. At this stage, the autonomy thesis seems symmetrical. Autonomy thesis means basically that one has the capacity to bound herself by norms, i.e. to *apply* certain *concept* according to the norm. But this capacity of mine depends on the others to lay the responsibility towards to norms, according to which I apply the concept, upon me. This, in Brandom's view merely *seemingly* paradoxical, constraint may, however, cause huge difficulties once we want to hold the idea of autonomy in a strict sense of the term. My authority over my activity seems real but partial. Is it possible to keep the idea of autonomy sensible despite its partiality? How are we, therefore, to solve this paradox?

Let us sketch an example that should enlighten the paradox in terms of Wittgensteinian conception of *language game*. If one wants to join certain language game, i.e. respond to an imperative: "Do the dishes!" correctly, what shall the one get to know and embrace. First, one need to understand the sentence, i.e. understand the language both structurally and semantically. That alone requires the one to has apprehended certain social background already. Second, one need to decide whether to listen to the imperative and yield to it. This analysis shows that even though the one rejects to obey the order or request, there remains one condition, i.e. the first concerning her understanding of the order, that disturbs the balance of the whole recognitive structure. The second condition represents the exact symmetrical structure Brandom offers in his reading of Hegel: one appreciates certain language game, norm respectively, but lays his authority over it by making a free decision to apprehend it at the same time. Yet, the first condition, as was concluded, does not possess this symmetry, and therefore makes the whole idea of autonomy fallacious.

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein clearly states that there is no such thing as the last belief that would ground all the other beliefs so to say. Similarly, if we infer from this argument, we could say there is no such thing as the last language game either. Davidson states there is a kind of interdependency between all beliefs. The *conceptual*, including the capacity of *naming* objects and *forming* beliefs needs to rely on some other ground, therefore. This ground is the *social* ground, for if it were merely *empirical*, the argument would result either on *solipsism*, or on the idea of the last grounding belief which has been rejected already. On this behalf, the paradoxical state of autonomy thesis should be solved as well. Language games, i.e. norms in our terminology, starts from certain social interaction. But, every social interaction always presupposes certain language or norms pre-established already. To speak about the beginning of language or sociality is, therefore, misleading, and only resulting in an *infinite regress* (Formanova 2015). To erase the problem of asymmetry of autonomy thesis entirely, we shall, however, explain, how the language and the sociality works in time.

Negotiating and adjudicating the claims of mutually conditioning authorities, administering conceptual norms by applying them in distinct cases etc., is a *process* (Brandom 1999). Applying and instituting (administering) conceptual norms is not merely a temporal process but a *historical* one. That is what Hegel enlighten in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and what results from the fact that all that happens in time is socialized. The future application of certain concept has an authority over the past ones by assessing them in terms of their

³ Ivi, p. 32.

correctness or incorrectness. Simultaneously, the past applications have their authority over the future ones while holding the tradition according to which the future applications is be made, or at least respond to it in some way. Therefore, the present application, as a mediator between the future and the past ones, responds and lays its authority twice. Once towards the past applications of the concept with accord to or critical assessment of the past ones; once towards the future applications that are pre-established both in the past and the present ones, and which are at the same time authoritative towards the previous two by featuring as their future assessor and corrector. In these relations, we may see how the mutual recognition works in general. For anytime X has authority over Y, X needs Y in order to have something that would hold its authority on it. Therefore, both X and Y are equally important in this relation.

5 CONCLUSION

Recognition is recognition of inferentially structured commitments⁴. This thesis implies that I am not forced to follow commitments that are valid for a person or a group of persons or a community. If a person was educated in an open and flexible manner then she has concrete chances to be autonomous because she becomes ready to take part to the game of giving and asking for reasons, and this implies the consideration of all the reasons I can plausibly come to know.

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⁴ This theoretical opinion differs from the Hegelian interpretation of recognition and the space of reasons offered by Italo Testa in his essay *Seconda natura e riconoscimento*, in *Lo spazio sociale delle ragioni: da Hegel in avanti*, Guerini, Milano, 2007 forthcoming.