

Can an Autonomous Person be Immoral?

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Abstract

A number of philosophers have argued in the past few decades that the concept autonomy does not necessarily entail an obligation to be moral. Thus an extremely autonomous person can be highly immoral. In this view "autonomy" is supreme value. For example, in *Autonomy: An Essay in Philosophical Psychology and Ethics*, Lawrence Haworth argues that it is not obvious that the condition of being autonomous requires one to choose moral ends. But, given Haworth's account of "autonomy" as a supreme value, as an ideal which has priority over values such as liberty, pleasure, and preference satisfaction, I think it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to hold that an autonomous person can afford to be immoral. In this paper I (1) present a brief analysis of Haworth's conception of autonomy, (2) discuss the sense in which autonomy is a fundamental value, (3) critically evaluate the arguments he advances to show that "autonomy" does not entail commitment to moral ends. The proposition I plan to defend is that Haworth's conception of autonomy should mean "self-realization", otherwise the concept of autonomy would be reduced to a concept of freedom and as such cannot function as an ideal of human conduct in education, legal legislation, and social and personal life.

Introduction

Some philosophers have argued that autonomy is a supreme value in social, moral, and political conduct. As such, it does not necessarily entail a need or an obligation to be moral. For example, Lawrence Haworth argues that the concept of autonomy as an idea of human conduct does not necessarily entail a need or an obligation to be moral.¹ Thus "an extremely autonomous person" can be "highly immoral". A human being can assume full charge of his or her life with admirable skill and efficiency, she can exercise the highest degree of independence, self-control and critical competence, and she can accomplish her purposes in life with the highest degree of personal satisfaction without necessarily feeling an obligation to be moral. It is not obvious, Haworth argues, that the condition of being autonomous requires one to choose only moral ends. It may well be that autonomy does not entail a need to be moral. This will depend in the final analysis on what we mean by "autonomy". But given Haworth's account of "autonomy", especially his view that autonomy is an intrinsic value, indeed the fundamental value, and that it is an ideal which has priority over values such as liberty, pleasure, and preference satisfaction, I think it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to hold that an autonomous person can afford to be immoral. In what follows, I shall (1) present a brief analysis of Haworth's conception of autonomy, (2) discuss the sense in which autonomy is a fundamental value, and consequently an ideal of conduct, and (3) critically evaluate the arguments he advances to show that "autonomy" does not entail a commitment to moral ends. The proposition I plan to defend is that Haworth's conception of autonomy should mean "self-realization", otherwise the concept of autonomy would be reduced to a concept of freedom and as such it cannot function as an ideal of human conduct in education, legal legislation, and social and personal life.

Concept of Autonomy

The defining idea of autonomy is "self-rule" (or self-government). This idea is derived from the Greek *auto* (self) and *nomos* (rule, law). It was first used as a political category; it denoted autonomous states. An independent state makes, and is governed, by its own laws. In this condition a state acquires the status of independence; for "self-government" implies that the laws the autonomous state obeys are not imported from or imposed on it by another state or power. Absence of external constraint basically defines the aspect of independence. But the application of "autonomy" to human beings is, however, a recent, modern practice. This application is analogical: A person, like a state, is said to be autonomous in so far as she is self-ruled. But when this application became accepted and in vogue during the past four

hundred years "autonomy" acquired a new, and we can say richer, connotation. We should, therefore, ask: In what sense is an autonomous person self-ruled? Or, what are the basic elements of the concept of autonomy?

For Haworth, the concept of autonomy is composed of three elements: independence, self-control, and competence. The first two practically define the concept of freedom, namely, the ability of a human being to make a choice and act on it without external (independence) and internal (self-control) influence, or constraint. The concept of self-rule logically implies that a self that rules itself is independent in the sense that it is not either influenced or ruled by something external to it, be it a person, god, society, state, or some kind of institution or association. It also implies that the self does not passively or foolishly borrow the beliefs it acts on from others, for in this case basis of its the action would not be its self, viz., its beliefs, but the beliefs of others. "Self-rule is not possible," Haworth writes, "If the person's objectives are simply borrowed from others. In that case it is not he who rules." (43) This does not, however, mean that one cannot under certain conditions acquire or adopt beliefs from others and yet retain her independence. Haworth makes a distinction between substantive and procedural independence. A person who thoughtlessly and uncritically borrows her beliefs from others is substantively dependent; she is a conformist. She does not act from herself, but according to the beliefs, tastes, or values of others. Her dependence on others is substantial. "Independence" does not refer to the source or validity of the beliefs one acts on but the conditions under which one acts on the beliefs she happens to adopt as hers. But a person who borrows or adopts a belief from others as her own thoughtfully, deliberately, and voluntarily is procedurally independent: "Behavior is procedurally independent, regardless of how much it may conform to that of others or deliberately follow a pattern laid out by others, to the extent that the decision to initiate it and to continue with it is one's own." (20) The focus of self-rule, then, is on the self. The self is an agent, and as such it is in charge of the activity of self-ruling. But this focus does not only imply absence of external control or influence, it also implies absence of internal control or influence. A necessary condition for self-rule is self-control. "Self-control" is a metaphorical expression; it does not literally refer to the act, or state, in which a self controls, or dominates, itself the way a human being can be controlled or dominated by another human being, but rather its ability to comprehend the affective states – impulses, passions, feelings, moods, wishes, strivings – which may compete with each other in making a rational decision about a certain problem or state of affairs. In this activity it does not function as a subject that gives orders or directs a traffic system; it only seeks to discover the rational course of action and give assent

to it. Giving this assent generates the needed energy to give priority to that course. The affective states are events, occurrences; they happen causally, and the way they happen is not always within one's knowledge, intellectual grasp, or control. Thus to succeed in ruling itself a self should be able to exercise a reasonable measure of control over the mental dimension of its being. In Haworth's words, "self-rule is not possible if the person's passions and impulses dictate his responses, so that he is led to do that which, had he reflected, he would have avoided doing." (43)

The third, and central, component of the concept of autonomy is competence, the ability of a person to act or to achieve definite goals. For Haworth, competence has "two aspects: it is awareness of agency, that one is an effective producer of intended effects; and (b) it is an awareness of how well one performs, an awareness that involves a sense of confidence or lack of confidence in oneself." (16) The first aspect refers to what Haworth calls "occurrent agency," namely, one's awareness that she is the subject, or agent, or the goals she pursues and that she is able to accomplish these goals. The social aspect refers to a person's general attitude toward her life in general; this involves the distinct consciousness that she possesses a repertoire of skills that enables her to design certain plans of action and realize them. Thus to be an agent means to be a subject; it means to be able to preside over the psychological, social, intellectual, and material content of one's action. I do not exaggerate if I say that, for Haworth, the basic, actuating principle of autonomy is reason, or critical reflection. The hypothesis which guides his thinking in developing his theory of autonomy is: Thinking sets one free. Thinking should not here be understood only as "formal" or syllogistic reasoning, but the power to understand, reflect, relate, infer, evaluate, envision possibilities and consequences of action, and discriminate between those aspects of experience which are right, wrong, good, useful, beautiful, or tragic. Accordingly since competence reveals itself in action, and since autonomous action is essentially competent action, it is appropriate to refer to it as "critical competence". A critically competent person is one who relies on reason in managing her daily life; she is the sort of person who reflects on and critically evaluates her needs, desires, goals, values, and options in life: "For a life to be autonomous it must be reflective. This means more than that the person must stop and think about how he wants to live his life: The life itself must be sensitive to the thought and guided by it." (24) The object of this critical reflection is not only the goals which we project for attainment, nor only the means we adopt for realizing these goals, but especially the rationale, or reasons, for adopting them: What reasons – good, valid reasons – can we give for choosing our beliefs, tastes, habits,

profession, in short, our way of life as a whole? An autonomous person does not respond to the call of life passively or mechanically *qua* conformist but actively, creatively; she critically reflects on what she does. She is the sort of person who is ready to justify to the best of her ability the content and direction of her life. This only shows that being autonomous is a process, a life process; it does not refer to an action or a series of actions, or even to a segment of one's life, but to the totality of such a life. As such it is challenge, a task to be realized. The autonomous life is an adventure in creative achievement. (26, 54, 62, 193, 197)

Autonomy As An Ideal Condition

Let us now ask: What is the place of autonomy in human life in general? Is autonomy a value among other cherished values? Should we seek it as a means to an end, or as an end in itself. Suppose it is an intrinsic value, is it supreme, so that pursuing it becomes the fundamental organizing principle of one's life? Again, is autonomy an ideal? If so, in what sense should we seek it as an ideal? For example, does the pursuit of autonomy conflict with other important values such as community, tradition, or the moral laws of society? Suppose a conflict arises between the autonomous life and the need to obey a recognized or established moral principle – which of these two receive priority, commitment to the autonomous life or obedience to the moral principle? I raise these questions because I am anxious to see whether Howarth's conception of autonomy can be accepted as an ideal of human conduct and, consequently, whether it can be recommended for pursuit in education, legal legislation, and social and personal life.

For Haworth, autonomy is not only an intrinsic value, a value we seek for its own sake, it "is the fundamental value." (184) It is superior to any other value we prize in our life such as liberty, pleasure, and the satisfaction of our preferences. These three values are crucial for our lives as human beings, and perhaps we cannot have any claim to happiness without them, but no one of them can be considered a supreme principle of conduct; they are, Haworth argues, conditions of autonomy. We value them primarily because they contribute to the realization of the autonomous life. The latter is the ideal we should seek in whatever we think, feel, or do. Why? What makes autonomy so valuable and an ideal? An answer to this question should, for Haworth, proceed from a consideration of why autonomy as such is valuable, for the difference between autonomy as an actual condition and as an ideal is one of degree. Indeed autonomy is "a complex condition formed by the unlimited and unified presence in one person of self-control independence, and competence. The unified complex is one of unrestricted critical competence." (194)

Thus a reasonable account of normal autonomy should pave the way for a genuine understanding of autonomy as an ideal; "one possessed of unrestricted critical competence would have unlimited ability to realize his purposes within the constraints imposed by the ineradicable independence from others." So the main difference between normal and ideal autonomy is the extent to which a person can realize her capacity of critical competence. The more one succeeds in advancing in this direction the closer one gets to the ideal state of autonomy. We should accordingly ask: why is autonomy valuable? why should we prize it over liberty, pleasure, and the satisfaction of our preferences?

It would seem at first difficult to give a direct answer to this question, mainly because valuing autonomy is intertwined with "our sense of ourselves, not just our sense of what we happen to be, but our sense of being at all." (195) Being autonomous is the condition of being a self; in Haworth's words, "autonomy grounds individuality." (185) Without autonomy I cannot be the individual I am, that is I cannot function as the subject of my daily activities, nor can I fully realize liberty, pleasure, and the satisfaction of my preferences. This achievement of these ends is the substance of my life. Only a subject knows what it means to be free, to seek pleasure, and struggle for goals. This is why the "question, 'Why do I value autonomy?' resembles the question, 'Why do I value life itself' "Thus autonomy is the very condition of life itself; when it for some reason goes away the meaning of one's life goes away with it. But how are we to understand this relationship between the value of autonomy and human life? We can, for Haworth, articulate this value in three propositions. First, there is in us as human beings a basic urge to stand out – "to be an individual, to continue to stand out." I say "basic," because this urge is inherent in human nature; we cannot explain it, or explain it away, by means of a deductive or inductive argument, and if there is an argument for its existence, it is this: "We simply are set up that above all else our autonomy matters to us. Most, at least, of the other things that matter to us, including life itself, matter only on the assumption that we are autonomous or that they will facilitate our becoming autonomous." Perhaps this explains why for Haworth autonomy is an intrinsic value. Second, the desire for autonomy is a desire to make a mark. A human being does not want simply to exist, she wants to make a difference in this world, to change it in some way, to add something to it of herself, something uniquely hers. This, it seems to me, is an expression of our desire to be, or to be an individual; for in order for a thing (or a human being) to be, it should last. What is subject to change does not last; therefore, it cannot be included as an element in the furniture of reality. Thus the desire to make a mark is a desire to last, to abide. The mark is not made, or made

adequately, if it does not last. Third, being responsible is an integral aspect of autonomy. An autonomous person is a responsible person; thus the thrust for autonomy is at the same time a thrust for responsible action. One cannot be an agent unless she is in full charge of her action – of seeing to it that she conceives, plans, and executes her action according to her own vision or purpose. Here in this context responsibility does not simply refer to the consequences of the action or to accountability of these consequences, but to its totality, to the ability of the autonomous person to perform a significant action on the basis of thoughtful initiative, purpose, and competence. An action done under the conditions of responsibility expresses the self of the autonomous person.

Accordingly, we value normal autonomy because it enables us to be ourselves, make a mark, and lead a responsible life. And we value autonomy as an ideal condition basically for the same reasons, but with an added meaning: Autonomy as an ideal condition demands from us to be active to the highest possible degree, to realize the fullest of human potentialities, and to assume full charge of our lives: "One achieves full (realistic) autonomy to the degree his choices exemplify full rationality, the ideal limit of critical competence. He possesses ability actually to realize whatever projects he embarks on, within the limits set by the facticity that constrains him. And this competence is wholly at his command." (64) This, it seems to me, is an attractive ideal, for it poses a challenge to be active, responsive to our human needs, and assume complete responsibility for our lives. Some questions, however, are in order: Does autonomy as an ideal condition conflict with other important values? Are we to view autonomy as a supreme good, so that if other goods conflict with it occupies first place in our life? Haworth is not unaware of the relevance of these and related questions. He argues, as indicated earlier, that autonomy is *the* fundamental value; it, and it alone, is the supreme principle that should guide all our conduct in the spheres of education, legal legislation, and personal and social life. He rejects, for example, Kant's identification of autonomy with morality for two reasons: (1) There is no justification for assuming that "to be moral an act must be done from pure respect for law", and (2) "even on a more conventional understanding of the relevance of the motive on which one acts to the morality of the act" is no reason to hold that "an autonomous person is necessarily moral." (156-7) Thus there is no logical connection between autonomy and morality. It should then follow that an extremely autonomous person can be highly immoral. (157) One cannot help at this point of our discussion but press the question one more time: Suppose, in her attempt to realize the fullest of her potentialities creatively and rationally, the autonomous person finds it necessary to act immorally, where

acting otherwise will limit her autonomy, should she ignore the immoral imperative? And if she does, would she be a fully autonomous human being? I press this question because I want to put into sharp focus the relationship which exists between autonomy and the rest of the values which matter in our life. An ideal of human conduct should, it seems to me, function as a principle of action in all the spheres of life; it should, moreover, guide us effectively in situations of value conflict. It should, in short, be relied on as the highest arbiter in our struggle to realize the best in us as human beings.

Haworth avers that pursuit of autonomy may conflict with other important goals such as community, tradition, and duty. These goals tend to place some restrictions on human conduct, for they define in a certain way how we should behave in the various spheres of practical life. Thus if autonomy as an ideal condition demands that we pursue our life projects independently, it would seem that a conflict between this goal and the given goals of society are bound to clash. One will, then, be forced either to act independently of the goals of society or give up her autonomous life and succumb to the pressure of social life. In the first case we will have a society dominated by anarchic behavior, and in the second a society composed of people who are not individuals. But, Haworth argues, this does not have to be the case, for the independence which distinguishes the autonomous person is not substantive but *procedural* independence. "Being independent" does not necessarily imply disregard for the goals, norms, or practices of society. What matters is that the members of society critically evaluate, deliberate, and adopt these goals, norms, or practices. Thus, it is possible for a society to be a community, i.e. to be composed of human individuals. The problem which Haworth sees with the preceding possibility of clash between the ideal of autonomy and the values of the community is not theoretical but empirical and practical. Empirically, we can ask: To what extent does an ambitious drive for autonomy actually corrode community relationships? An answer to this question requires a comprehensive knowledge of the actual state of the social setting within which the question arises. Practically, the problem focuses on the structure of social institutions: "Since in principle the most extensive autonomy is achievable within the most intensive community, if we desire both we should hope to devise innovative practices and institutions capable of realizing such integration." (202) Thus on the practical level our aim should be to design social institutions that are conducive to the highest degree of autonomy for all the members of society. But even in such an attempt we remain haunted by the possibility of conflict. We should accordingly ask: "How important is the pursuit of autonomy as an ideal condition vis-a-vis other goals? In particular, how important is it in comparison with the

goals grounded in appreciation of communal values, tradition, and a shared life?" (205) For Haworth, autonomy should receive top priority. He distinguishes between two senses of priority – "practical" and "normative". From the practical point of view "that is, when we have an actual case in which we have to decide whether autonomy or communal values should receive priority, "the question of priority admits of no general answer. It cannot be said that in every case where a trade-off is required communal values should give way to pursuit of autonomy nor can it be said that the opposite should occur." (207) Such a question can be answered on the basis of normative priority. By "normative priority" we should understand a principle which prescribes a type of decision or a course of action. The prescription expresses what is right, true, appropriate, or good. The guiding norm in solving cases of conflict, Haworth argues, should be the tendency to realize the maximum amount of autonomy for all who are involved or affected by the decision/process. Autonomy is, as we see, an intrinsic value; it is the fundamental value. As such, it is the highest norm that should guide us in solving any problems that involve conflict between autonomy as an ideal condition and social or personal goals.

Critical Evaluation

But can such an ideal allow the possibility of an autonomous person being immoral? Yes, only if we reduce "autonomy", contrary to Haworth's interpretation of this concept, to a capacity of making choices – thoughtfully, critically, deliberately – and acting on these choices, that is, if we reduce it to what we usually call "freedom". However, an autonomous person cannot, I submit, in principle and *qua* autonomous, choose to act immorally. This is based on the assumption that autonomy means "self-rule". But what is involved in the activity of self-ruling? Under what conditions – concrete family, psychological, work, social – can the self assume full charge of its life as a human being? A serious consideration will, I think, show that a fully autonomous person, one who actively and creatively responds to his unique human capacities and seeks to realize them in the course of daily life, cannot afford to act immorally. The assertion that there is no link between autonomy and morality or that autonomy as an ideal condition is the fundamental value and as such has the highest normative priority in settling situations of conflict in personal and social life, carries some measure of validity only if we reduce autonomy to a capacity of making choices and successfully acting on these choices. This reduction severely impoverishes the concept of autonomy and robs it of its status as an ideal of human character in education, legal legislation, and personal and social life. In what follows, I shall attempt to elucidate

and defend this objection. I shall not in this attempt seek to defend Kant's position on moral autonomy or on the relationship between autonomy and morality. This requires a lengthy study which is beyond the scope of this chapter. I shall therefore restrict myself to an examination of whether a fully autonomous person, the way Haworth understands this notion, can, in principle, afford to ignore the accepted moral values and principles of society.

We have seen that the concept of autonomy for Haworth consists of three elements: independence, self-control, and competence. The first two elements provide the basic conditions for self rule, for "independence" refers to absence of external constraints, and "self-control" refers to absence of internal constraints, the state in which one's action is dictated by one's passions or impulses. Absence of both internal or external constraints, however, does not necessarily make one autonomous. In order for a person to be autonomous he should be able to act according to beliefs, values, or principles that originate from his mind or will. This requires critical reflection, on the one hand, and competence, on the other. An autonomous person is a critical by competent person. He is, moreover, an agent, an individual. He is not subject to a law, or authority, external to himself (heteronomy) but to the law of his will, to the law which his reason conceives and assents to. Agency, however, is not given; it is an achievement. Being an agent is a life-project; it is a continuous process of realization. This process constantly aims at an ideal state. A fully autonomous person is distinguished by a highly developed faculty of critical competence. This faculty enables him to realize the widest possible spectrum of his potentialities actively and creatively within the limits of facticity imposed upon him by the social context which nourishes his life as an individual.

The preceding account reveals a strange inconsistency in Haworth's conception of autonomy. Critical competence is presented as the basic principle of autonomy. The autonomist relies on this faculty in designing and realizing his goals in life; his first and primary loyalty is to his own life-projects. He is not, in other words, bound by the tradition, morals, or common norms of society. This is mainly why he can choose to ignore the moral values and principles of society. "If the account of autonomy developed in part I," Haworth writes, "is correct, then we are bound to admit the possibility of an extremely autonomous person being highly immoral. Critical competence requires taking a critical attitude toward one's ends as well as toward the means by which those ends are pursued; but it is not obvious that a condition of being adequately critical is that one choose only moral ends." (157) When Haworth states that it is not "obvious that a condition of being adequately critical is that one choose only moral ends" he certainly means that being

adequately critical does not necessarily entail an obligation to uphold the moral values and principles of society; that is, there is no *necessary* connection between being moral and being autonomous. A person can in *principle* lead a fully autonomous life without feeling obliged to adopt the values and principles of society, mainly because he is in his actual life guided by an "adequate" faculty of critical competence. If, for example, he is confronted with a moral command demanding from him an attitude of generosity, compassion, or justice he does not necessarily feel obliged to give priority to acting on this command, mainly because his ultimate ideal is to realize his own goals according to his own wisdom. Accordingly we can envisage him as a mean, cruel, conniving, greedy, selfish, and unjust person; we can, in other words, envisage him as a morally evil person.

I have emphasized “necessary” and “in principle” in the preceding paragraph only to point out that an autonomist for Haworth does not have to be an evil person, but he can be, and he can be evil because it seems that the central principle of the concept of autonomy is critical competence. The foregoing account calls for the following comment as the fundamental value: autonomy is a supreme good. How can the pursuit of such a good permit its seeker to be morally evil? Is such an ideal worth seeking? I am afraid that the conclusion we reached in the preceding paragraph clearly shows that Haworth has in fact reduced the concept the concept of autonomy to a concept of freedom, viz., the ability of a person to make a choice and act on it. He has in this way reduced “autonomy” to technical concept, to a concept of *means*; for the power to choose is a means to an end. The end is the attainment of some purpose, while the power of choice is a means of realizing this purpose. But unfortunately Haworth divorced “autonomy” from the question of meaning, or value. The autonomist for him is the sort of person who has power over his passions, impulses, habits, beliefs, or actions; he is, in short, the master of his life. But this power, i.e., critical competence, does not provide any guide, imperative, or insight into the kind of action one should seek. And yet it would seem that we cannot properly rule ourselves without a purpose in life, without a set of values, beliefs, and established modes of conduct. Freedom without a rational purpose, without a well grounded sense of value, is capricious. Let us focus our attention for a moment on the concept of self-rule. An autonomous person acts on his own rules. These rules might originate directly from his mind or they might be adopted from an external source thoughtfully, critically, deliberately (procedural independence). Following these rules in the spheres of family, work, society, and personal life constitutes the structure and substance of his life. These rules, however, are not, and cannot be viewed as abstract. They relate to the basic types of

human conduct in daily living, to moral, religious, political, educational, aesthetic and material conduct. They are in some way or another value-laden rules. Living according to them determines the meaning of one's life. The experience of meaning is an integral aspect of the rules one adopts in pursuing the autonomous life. We cannot, it seems to me, talk about self-rule without at the same time talking about the meaning which those rules expresses or fosters. Thus in order for a person to be fully autonomous, i.e., to rule himself properly, he needs two basic principles: critical competence and a conception of life – (a sense of value, or purpose, which expresses this conception). Without this sense the faculty of critical competence will necessarily rely on its own resources in plotting its courses of action. It can be logical, cunning, and enlightened, but without a sense of value that can define its purpose, viz., goals, hopes, desires, needs, that is, without a solid foundation on which it can stand in realizing its human potentialities, it will necessarily recoil upon itself like a fountain that sends its water up into the open air only to return to its own source while the pastures around it are dying from thirst! The moral tradition of society is the cornerstone of this foundation.

On the other hand, Haworth presents the self as the fundamental principle of autonomy. The assumption which underlies this premise is "that without competence there can be no self, and without a self there can be no self-rule." (16) The bedrock of autonomy is, then, the self. One seeks autonomy in order to become a self, an individual. And one seeks individuality in order to attain the maximum amount of satisfaction in one's life. Early in his analysis of "autonomy" Haworth clearly states that the concept of autonomy he plans to develop should apply to practical life, "to the way people live their lives as a whole," (24) This programmatic thesis is elucidated in some depth later on when he discusses the value of autonomy. Here we are told that the value of autonomy is identical with the value of life itself. "Losing autonomy would be like a light going out." (185)

The self which Haworth considers in his analysis of autonomy is not an abstract self, it is the self of ordinary human beings who carry on the business of daily living in the sphere of family, social life, business, religious and personal endeavors – the self which worries, hopes, agonizes over its life-projects, the self which frequently experiences frustration, dejection, success, rejection, elation, and the sting of adventure, the self which asks questions about goodness, evil, and the mystery which envelopes human life and the life of the world. It is, in short, the social self, the self of a particular human individual who lives in a definite stretch of time and in a specific society.

Though briefly, let us focus our attention on this self. Haworth has not done this; and yet such a focus is crucial for ascertaining whether an autonomist can afford to be immoral. What is the content of the self? Perhaps I prejudiced my question by referring to it as "social". This should not, I think, damage the line of reasoning I am developing. Broadly speaking, I may be told that the content of a particular self consists of ideas, beliefs, passions, dispositions, impulses, sensations, strivings, moods, images, and certain mental powers and capacities. These refer to details which play definite roles in the way we feel, think, react, imagine, choose, and act. For example, a self possesses a *diverse* mass of medias, images, or passions. What matters for the purpose at hand is that, from an empirical point of view, the self is made up of a content peculiar to its own nature. This content is the substance of its life; that is, the life of a self revolves around the activities of feeling, sensing, imagining, choosing, judging, and planning courses of action. What is the source of this content? The majority of philosophers and social scientists would, I think, say that its source is society; and by "society" they mean the intricate web of social institutions, organizations, programs, and activities within which the physical, psychological, and material life of the individual develops from the moment of its inception to its adult life. That is, the beliefs, values, tastes, mental and social skills, habits, desires, fears, inhibitions, language, in short, his conception of life (*weltanschauung*) comes from society. He shares, to a great extent, this conception with the other members of society; and yet in spite of this sharing, he is, at least to some degree, an individual. How much of an individual he can be depends on his biological make-up, creativity, imagination, education, social opportunities, and wisdom.

But the self is social in another sense – in the sense that it cannot achieve its goals, carve its niche in the world, and cultivate its interests and mental endowments apart from society. Nothing one does can have value outside a social context, regardless of whether this context is actual or imaginary. Value, as Dewey frequently said, emerges out of the complex relations which hold people together. Consider, for example, a painter – would he paint if he does not, to begin with, possess a sense of value, knowledge of how to paint, a notion of beauty, an idea of the significance of painting, in short a reasonable experience of the institution of painting? Moreover, would he paint if there were not an audience who could enjoy and appreciate his work, if he were not moved in the act of painting by a deep seated urge for communication? The social context is, it seems to me, the fertile soil which nourishes the self in its growth as an individual and in its attempt to realize its potentialities.

The point which I have been trying to underscore in the preceding remark, and to which Haworth would I think assent, is that the self, the self that rules itself, is always a *particular* self, it is a concrete individual achieved in a definite social setting. It acquires its basic structure and content in this setting. Now, let us ask: Can such a self, *qua* autonomous, afford to ignore or violate the moral values and principles of society, that is, can it accord to lead an immoral life without undermining its autonomy? My answer to this question is in the negative for the following reasons.

The concept of self-rule should, to begin with, mean self-realization, otherwise, as I pointed out earlier "self-rule" would necessarily be reduced to a concept of freedom. But a self-realized person cannot, in virtue of being a social self, afford to ignore the principles of society – why? I shall proceed in my answer to this question with a brief comment on "self-rule". What is involved in self-ruling? (a) The self assumes full charge of what to do and how to do what needs or should be done. To be able to do this, it should assume the status of an agent or person. An agent presides over its activities; it conceives, projects, and oversees the actualization of these activities. (b) The self must claim the ideas, beliefs, rules, or goals on which it acts. It should be in a position to say in a dramatic moment of critical self-examination: "These are mine!" As we saw, the ideas, beliefs, rules, may or may not spontaneously originate from the agent's mind. What matters is that he or she rationally and voluntarily adopts and incorporates them in the structure of his willing, feeling, and thinking mechanism. (c) The self must assume responsibility for what it does. It should feel competent, accomplished, in what it does, and it should be ready to account for the consequences of its actions, mainly because it is the author of these actions. It has, after all conceived, willed, and realized them!² Even though the self cannot foresee all the consequences of its action, it is, in principle, responsible for the totality of these consequences.

Next, what is the content which constitutes the activity of self-ruling? What does this content refer to? Well, the activity of self-ruling consists of the actions which the self performs in the practical sphere of life. But this activity is the very process of daily living in which the self actualizes its potentialities as a particular human being – (self-realization, self-fulfillment, self-achievement). It is, moreover, the very process in which it becomes an agent (subject, person). Agency is not simply a status formally conferred upon someone; it is an achievement, and it is achieved in the process of acquiring a particular identity, that is, a unique core of beliefs, values, will, habits, and certain mental and behavioral skills. One becomes an agent when one acquires a substantial, actual self. Thus one cannot be an agent, nor can one

refer to himself as one, unless he functions as an agent. The substance of agency is its achievements. Thus, one is not an agent in virtue of his capacity to choose, nor in virtue of his capacity of critical competence, but in virtue of his capacity to actualize himself as a human being. Critical competence is a means to self-actualization. The sphere of self-actualization cannot, however, exclude the domain of moral conduct. One cannot undertake a life project of self-actualization without upholding the moral principles and values of society. Why? Because the self to be realized is the whole self, consequently, as a self-actualizing person, the autonomist cannot ignore the moral domain in the process of self-actualization, for otherwise he would consciously choose not to actualize the totality of his human potentialities. I here assume that being moral is an essential, or perhaps indispensable, aspect of being human: One cannot be truly human without being moral. I may be reminded that an autonomist might find the given morals of society spiritually stale, decadent, and sometimes confusing. He might be motivated by lofty, noble moral aspirations. Therefore, he must be justified in ignoring the given system of moral principles and values. But, in response, can the autonomist reject these principles and values? No, because, first, one cannot create or formulate moral principles and values that are alien or inconsistent with the given moral fabric of society. Even moral geniuses such as Socrates, who are strongly dissatisfied with the moral posture of his society, do not make this attempt. One might try to reform, enrich, or give a new interpretation to the existing moral principles and values, and this is a slow process, but one cannot invent a new or different system of moral conduct. Moreover, the attempt to create a new set of moral rules and values assumes that a person who makes this attempt is morally a *tabula rasa*, void of any moral feeling or consciousness. But, as we saw, the self is always a substantial self, and as such a moral self. This self was nourished at the bosom of social ethos during the first part of its life. Thus even if it seeks, for some serious reason, to reject the existing system of moral principles and values it is bound to do so on the basis of its intuition of what is moral or immoral. Secondly, let us grant, for the sake of discussion, that a person can create a new system of moral conduct – can such a person be fully autonomous in a society whose moral values and principles he completely rejects? No, for then we should be able to imagine (of course a theoretical possibility) a society composed of autonomous people who espouse different and necessarily conflicting moral outlooks. Can a person lead an autonomous life in such a society? Morality is essentially social; it implies a general acceptance of certain moral principles and values. This acceptance creates a general sense of expectation, of how people should act and react in relation to each other in certain circumstances. This acceptance

is, moreover, the foundation of harmony in social and inter-personal life. Without this harmony any quest for autonomy would be difficult to attain. Thus a person who adopts moral principles and values that are radically different from those generally accepted by society will necessarily collide in his pursuit of his own ideals with others. This collision will lead either to deep seated frustration or to alienation from society. Young people usually experience this sort of frustration or alienation early in their youthful life only to discover later on, and sometimes very late, that it is really difficult to ignore the established moral tradition of society.

A person who prizes his life over the established moral tradition of society, who allows himself to act immorally, undermines in principle his own autonomy. He is the sort of person who wants to have his cake and eat it at the same time, but unfortunately he cannot do this without a heavy price. In developing this point I shall rely on the proposition which I defended in the preceding section: the activity of self-ruling is an activity of self-realization. Now, a person cannot be himself outside a social context; the latter is the medium within which the activity of self-ruling takes place. It is also the medium which provides the means and stuff of self-ruling, for this activity involves the fulfillment of one's wants or preferences in the sphere of work, family, social, personal, and political life. Outside the social context self-ruling is an abstraction; consequently, outside this context one cannot be a self. Next, to be an active member of society means to participate in the adventure of living of that society, and to do this one should accept its rules of conduct, values, and general expectations and act according to them. It also means to contribute what one can to the general welfare of that society. Social life is a cooperative adventure (Rawls). Thus one cannot reject or be indifferent to the moral principles and values which are an integral part of the general system of rules and values of society, for this rejection or indifference would *ipso facto* constitute a rejection of the conditions of self-realization. This general system is the foundation of social cooperation, harmony, and progress. If the bonds of this system are for some reason weakened or factured the very conditions of social life will be disrupted. This can happen when a large segment of society tend to use the state for their selfish end, when they turn their back to the political process, when they cheat on their taxes, when they show no compassion for the weak, the sick, the poor, and the wronged, when they show no concern for the ecological system which is their natural home! People cannot thrive as human individuals in this sort of atmosphere. When a person acts immorally he causes harm to others; and when he assumes a

general immoral attitude, an attitude of indifference to the moral rules and values of society, and uses its natural and human resources to achieve his life-projects, he reduces himself to a social parasite!

When we say, with Haworth, that it is possible for an autonomous person to be immoral we do not only imply that such a person gives priority to her autonomy, we also imply that she can ignore the established moral rules and values of society. One may violate an important moral rule under heavy pressure, out of ignorance, or because of weakness of will. And sometimes heroic people, great people who give themselves to sublime causes frown upon some moral rules or injunctions that stand in the way of their noble quest. I shall not have in mind in the following remark any of these kinds of people. I shall restrict myself exclusively to ordinary people in ordinary situations.³ Can an autonomous person afford to be immoral? The word “can” is somewhat vague, for in a sense a person can physically do many outrageous things which are strongly forbidden in society. For example, I can walk naked into a church one Sunday morning and create an obscene scene in the midst of the congregation or I can commit suicide for no good reason whatever. This is not the sense of “can” Haworth has in mind when he says an autonomous person can be immoral. For him, “can” refers to “good reasons”, to rationally justifiable action, for, as we saw, the autonomist is a critically competent person. Thus when we ask, can an autonomist afford to be immoral? we should mean, can such a person justifiably choose to be immoral? I am inclined to think no for the following reasons.

The moral sphere embraces the totality of human action in all the domains of social and personal life; that is, any action we perform in these domains has a moral character or impact; for what we do affects, in some way and to some degree, the well-being of others. It may enhance or retard their well-being. Morality, or being moral, is not and cannot be, reduced to a formal obedience to certain established rules but to the widest possible application of these rules in all the domains of action. As a free person, I can choose to conduct my life in a certain way. For example, I can choose my friends, the woman I want to marry, my profession, or how to spend my leisure time. These and similar activities fall within the sphere of my will, reason, and personal sense of value. But I cannot in any of the sphere of daily activities choose what is wrong. Consider the following example. I take a walk along the river one afternoon. I may do so in order to rest after several hours of study, enjoy the beauty of the scene, or hear the birds sing. This action, which may seem at first look neutral, has a moral character, for I perform it because it meets a need. Meeting this need certainly contributes to my well-being. This will, in turn, have an impact upon my family, friends, and perhaps what I shall

do the next day. I might choose to meet this need in this or that way, but I am under obligation to meet this need. I mention this example to stress that the actions which make up the building blocks of social life are essentially moral. Now, can the autonomist afford to trample on the moral principles and values of society and pursue her life according to her own wisdom? No, because any action she rationally chooses to perform, that is, any action which engages the attention of her will, falls within the sphere of moral action. I stress this point only to indicate that a person in pursuit of the autonomous life cannot escape the moral demand placed upon her by society. But she cannot escape the moral demand placed upon her by her own self, for this self is a moral self and she cannot escape this fact; and if she cannot, then she cannot justifiably ignore the moral principal and she cannot escape and values of society. How? Let us focus our attention once more on the concept of the self. We have seen that a human being is always a social self, for self-hood is an ongoing process of achievement; this process begins in the early period of childhood and acquires a definite structure (hopefully) after one passes through the period of puberty. At this point of its development, the self is an established bundle of beliefs, habits, feelings, mental states, and world outlook; it is a definite identity. It does not only know how to care for its body or how to study and, conduct its social activity with a measure of success, and plan some of its actions, it also knows how to distinguish between good and evil. we can say it possesses a moral sense. This sense, however, does not occupy a corner or a compartment of the self, nor does it exist in it as a belief or some kind of mental event, but permeates the fabric of the self as such. In addition to its being social, religious, or aesthetic, the self is also moral. The self as a whole is moral; that is, it presents itself to the world and conducts its daily activities as a moral self. Put differently, it thinks, feels, and reacts to the social world as the moral self it is. As Aristotle would say, a just person will always conduct herself in the world as just. This conduct reveals, so to say, this and similar qualities. The self acquires the moral dimension of its being as a second nature. It cannot, even if it tries, deny or dispose of this nature. It may, as Dewey rightly argued, gradually change, enrich, or modify its moral outlook according to its social and personal circumstances and endowments, but it cannot dismantle the moral dimension of its nature. Moreover, it is, as Hare pointed out, very difficult, almost impossible, to change the core of one's moral nature after one becomes 18-20 years old.⁴ The point which merits special emphasis here is that *qua* self, an autonomous person cannot, even if she chooses, take a moral holiday, for doing this would mean denying or acting contrary to what she is. But this is not possible unless one puts on a show. Moreover, in practical life the decisions we usually make,

especially those decisions which are conducive to our growth and development as human beings, are always value-laden decisions; they involve a choice between good and evil. Accordingly, in as much as the will of the autonomous person is moral it is bound to act according to the wisdom of its own moral sense. Not to act on this sense would be to act in bad faith. Even the autonomist who is directed in her life by critical competence and enlightened self-interest would not, I think, tend to act in bad faith. But if an autonomist chooses, for purely selfish reasons or out of foolish defiance, to trample on the moral principles and values of society, then she would necessarily either ignore the demand of human fulfillment, or the call for a life built on a thoughtfully articulated purpose, or utilize the privileges of her critical competence capriciously. This way of acting is not acting on good, justifiable reasons.

But Haworth would at this point of my discussion object: You seem to ignore, he would say, the significance of my concept of procedural independence, according to which an autonomous person does not have to reject the moral principles and values of society; one can, under the conditions of autonomy, choose to live according to the tradition, values, and social norms of society. I grant the significance of this concept, but, as Haworth clearly explains, the pursuit of autonomy as an ideal condition can, and does, conflict with goals such as tradition or community values. The question which we should underscore is: in situations of conflict, what should have priority, commitment to the autonomous life or, let us say, to a moral demand placed upon the autonomous person, a demand that would, if the individual submits to it, limit her autonomy? Consider a promising scientist who in realizing her professional talent must spend most of her time in the laboratory. After a while her husband and children show an urgent need for her being a part of their life. The time comes when she too feels the gravity of the situation; the elements of the conflict present themselves to her directly and clearly: I shall prosper as a scientist if I continue my diligent work in the laboratory, but if I do this, I shall lose my family. But if I meet the needs of my family materially and spiritually my work shall suffer – my autonomy shall be limited! Here we have a situation in which pursuit of autonomy conflicts with a moral obligation. What principle should we rely on in solving this conflict? According to Haworth, autonomy should receive first priority, for it is not only an intrinsic value, it is the fundamental value. But then can autonomy, divorced from a moral principle such as justice or compassion or virtue function as a standard for situations of conflict? I raise this question because for Howorth procedural independence can, but does not oblige, the autonomist to adopt principles, values, or tradition that conflicts with her pursuit of her autonomous life. In this

preceding example, the scientist should pursue, though painfully and reluctantly, her life-project in the laboratory – autonomy! This, it seems to me, is a questionable, if not misleading, way of solving situations of conflict between autonomy and other significant values, norms, or traditions, for it seems to condone, at least in some cases, a selfish mode of individual life. Can we seriously recommend such a concept of autonomy as an ideal of conduct in education, legal legislation, and social and personal life?

NOTES

1. Lawrence Haworth, *Autonomy: An Essay in Philosophical Psychology and Ethics* (Yale University Press, 1986). Further citations to this work will be embedded in the text.
2. This may seem a rather bold claim. To assume full responsibility for one's action does not necessarily mean that one cannot, because of ignorance or extremely extenuating circumstances, be excused or to some extent exonerated when the consequences of the action are beyond one's control. The point I wish to stress here is that one is responsible for his action inasmuch as he is an agent.
3. To avoid technical vagueness, I am using "can" in Howorth's sense of "possible". Thus when I ask, "Can a person act immorally?" I mean "Is it possible for a person to act immorally?"
4. R.M. Hare *The Language of Morals* (Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 72. See also Michael H. Mitias, *Moral Education and the Liberal Arts* (Greenwood Press, 1991), chap. 1.

