

AUTONOMY

[edited draft 1]

As the term itself implies, an autonomous individual is someone who is self-governing, who leads her life free from the kinds of interference and manipulation that would make us say her life is not in her control. Some notion of autonomy figures centrally in Mill's *On Liberty* (1759), although he does not use the term, as well as in various contemporary utilitarian views as *a*, if not *the*, central element of well-being or welfare. We can distinguish between three concepts of autonomy, all of which are present in one form or another in Mill.

One thing we might mean when we call someone autonomous is that she has the *right* or *authority* to make choices about his own life, whereas others do not. One version of this right – and so this conception of autonomy—is articulated early on in *On Liberty* right after Mill articulates what has come to be known as the Harm Principle: “The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection.” (*CW*, vol. 18, p.9 p.236) The details of the principle need not concern us. What matters for our purposes is the anti-paternalistic corollary to the Harm Principle, namely that only the individual has the right or authority to make decisions about matters that are “self-regarding” (p.238) or, in other words, matters that primarily concern only himself. As Mill puts it: “In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” (p.236) Here then, we have one understanding of what it is to be self-governing. It is to have a kind of sovereignty or sole authority over one’s life. We might call this *autonomy as right*.

Two other senses of autonomy make their appearance in chapter III of *On Liberty*, where Mill discusses the place of “individuality” in well-being. Two interpretations of what Mill means by “individuality” suggest themselves. In discussing the importance of not mindlessly conforming to “custom merely *as* custom” Mill says that, “He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice.” (p.267) And later on, Mill asserts that, “One whose desires and impulses are not his own has

no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character.” (p.268) If we take Mill at his word here, then his discussion of individuality seems to be about *free agency*. To be autonomous, then, is to be the kind of creature that is so much as able to make choices and, relatedly, to be able to be held accountable for what one does. We might call this *autonomy as free agency*.

Finally, Mill’s discussion of individuality in *On Liberty* suggests another sense of autonomy, one that is enjoyed by some free agents, but not others (or to a greater degree by some free agents). Mill’s emphasis on not blindly conforming to the demands of custom or authority, both in one’s thinking and one’s action, and in developing one’s capacities as a critical thinker, suggest a kind of autonomy that consists of thinking for oneself and exercising independence of mind. This kind of autonomy rings most true with our contemporary understanding of what it is to be an authentic individual (to be one’s own person, to live in accordance with one’s understanding of what is valuable and important). So, we might call it *autonomy as authenticity*.

The distinction between *autonomy as authenticity* and *autonomy as free agency* is slippery: some might think that they amount to the same thing. But this is surely too strong: someone can live an inauthentic life—a life that is largely shaped by the unthinking absorption of commitments and values from one’s culture, family or friends, and little else—while still being a free agent (someone who can properly be held responsible for what she does).

There are interesting questions about how a utilitarian understands the relationship between these senses of autonomy, particularly autonomy as authenticity and autonomy as right. This is a point I return to briefly at the end. The main interest in autonomy for utilitarian thought, however, is in autonomy as authenticity (henceforth simply “autonomy”), which is often taken to play a key role in well-being or welfare. The precise nature of the role of autonomy, however, is open to debate.

First, autonomy might have instrumental value with respect to well-being. The idea here is that the autonomous individual knows better than others what is best for her, and so promoting autonomous choices is an effective means of increasing well-being amongst individuals. Utilitarians that hew to a

hedonistic or preference-satisfaction conception of well-being will be inclined to see autonomy as *merely* instrumentally valuable, although the latter can carve out a fundamental role for autonomy in well-being by insisting that only the fulfillment of autonomously formed preferences contribute to well-being (I say more about this below). But many utilitarians think that whatever autonomy's instrumental value (as a causal antecedent of well-being), it is not *merely* instrumentally valuable. Instead, they think that it has non-instrumental value as a *constituent* element of well-being. The idea that autonomy has this non-instrumental value is nicely captured by James Griffin (1988): "Even if I constantly made a mess of my life, even if you could do better if you took charge, I would not let you do it. Autonomy has a value on its own." (p.67) Most people writing on the topic of autonomy—utilitarians or not—believe that autonomy is non-instrumentally valuable.

It is important to see that the claim that autonomy has non-instrumental value (as a constituent of well-being) is different from several allied claims that are far stronger. First, and most strongly, one might claim that nothing other than autonomy contributes to well-being *unless* it is autonomously endorsed. The basic idea is that something cannot be good for you unless you autonomously take it to be good for you or, to put it slightly differently, your desire for it or commitment to it is autonomous (Sumner (1990) and Haworth (1984)). On this view then, autonomy is unconditionally, non-instrumentally valuable (as a constituent of well-being), but the status of anything else as a constituent of well-being is conditional.

One might reject this "endorsement thesis" but still maintain that autonomy is *unconditionally* valuable. On this view, being autonomous always makes a positive contribution to well-being, whatever else is true of one's life (which is not to say that it always leads to an *overall* increase in well-being). It is perfectly possible, however, to maintain that autonomy has non-instrumental, *conditional* value. According to this view, autonomy non-instrumentally contributes to well-being only when another condition (or set of conditions) obtains. So, for example, Joseph Raz (1988) and Steven Wall

(1998), neither of whom, it should be noted, are utilitarians, have argued that autonomy is non-instrumentally valuable only when it is exercised in pursuit of the good.

The upshot of all this is that if a utilitarian includes autonomy as part of her conception of well-being, we need to know whether she thinks it is merely instrumentally valuable or whether it is (also) non-instrumentally valuable. And, if she thinks the latter, whether it is conditionally or unconditionally valuable. And, if she thinks of it as unconditionally valuable, whether the status of anything else as a constituent of well-being depends on its being autonomously endorsed.

A final thought: one might wonder whether a utilitarian can offer a plausible account of autonomy rights in terms of the value of autonomy as authenticity, or indeed in terms of well-being in general. The problem is that it is not clear how one can secure something like a *right*—which confers authority on the holder to make claims against others with respect to certain domains—simply from considerations of what is *good* or *valuable*. So, there is no obvious route from the claim that autonomy as authenticity is valuable as a constituent of well-being to the claim that people have the right to make choices about their own lives. But this is not just a problem for autonomy rights. It's an instance of the general problem of how we are to get something like rights out of a moral theory like utilitarianism that has as its core a commitment to promoting or producing overall well-being.

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Daniel Groll

Carleton College

See also Agency; James Griffin; Liberty; John Stuart Mill; Preferences (Preferentialism); Rights.

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