

Relational Autonomy

– An Examination of Dworkin’s Coherentism

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Abstract

Taking into consideration that the notion of autonomy has traditionally been individualistic, I argue that relational autonomy, as opposed to individualistic autonomy, is a plausible notion and that it puts forward reasonable criticism towards the individualistic notion of autonomy. I further argue that the prevalent coherentist position, put forward by Gerald Dworkin (b. 1937), meets the requirements of said criticism. I conclude that Dworkin’s position is compatible with a relational notion of autonomy.

1. Introduction

Does the influence of external factors—e.g. other agents and social relations—hinder autonomous agency? Autonomy plays a central role in current normative philosophical work. In particular, it has emerged as a central notion in applied ethics, e.g., in the biomedical context (Dworkin 1988). One could consider if applying for active euthanasia is ever autonomous or consider the relation between autonomy and consent in medical practice.

I do not discuss such particular questions. Rather, as the question in the beginning of the paper indicates, I aim to comprehend the *foundation* of such questions. I do so by approaching a plausible notion of autonomy and consider autonomy in regard to external influential factors. However, getting a clear notion of autonomy today is challenging, with theorists using the term with a variety of meanings. Autonomy can be identified with qualities of critical reflection, self-assertion, freedom from obligation, absence of external causation, etc. (ibid.: 4-6). The only feature that seems

to be held constant is its being a desirable quality. Therefore, I approach the notion of autonomy within certain limits, namely of the role of external factors in regard to autonomy.

I proceed as follows: In Sec. 2, I briefly outline the traditional, prevalent notion of individualistic autonomy. In Sec. 3, I outline and consider relational autonomy and its criticism of individualistic autonomy. I argue that the criticism is reasonable, i.e. that relational autonomy is a plausible notion of autonomy. To consider to what extent Dworkin's notion of autonomy meets this criticism, Sec. 4 outlines his position, including second-order desires, procedural independence and authenticity. On this basis, I discuss whether Dworkin's notion of autonomy is relational in Sec. 5. I argue that, given certain interpretations, it does take into account the influence of external factors—thus, it is a relational notion of autonomy. In Sec. 6, I conclude.

2. Autonomy Then and Now

The term *autonomy* has its origins in *autos* (*self*), and *nomos* (*law or rule*). Autonomy was first applied to the Greek city state, which had *autonomia* when its citizens made their own laws, i.e. when it was not under the control of some conquering power (Dworkin 1976: 23). The same basic notion was expressed by Immanuel Kant about two thousand years later. According to Kant, the will is therefore not merely subject to the law but also subject in the way that it must be considered as also making the law for itself. Some forces run counter to self-rule, according to Kant, but such forces are not only *external* (e.g. other agents). The principles one adopts cannot be accounted for by any contingent facts about the individual or her social/biological circumstances. Only by reference to the agent's nature as a rational being may the agent's choice of action be explained (Kant 1961: 98; Dworkin 1976: 23-24). Robert Wolff (b. 1933) extends the Kantian notion to the political realm and defines the autonomous man as not being a subject

to the will of another. If an autonomous agent does what others tell him to, it is not *because* he has been told to do so (Wolff 1970: 14). Such a conception of independence has become central among theories of autonomy; the lack of influence from and relation to external factors renders the theories *individualistic*. This traditional, individualistic notion is the aim of the criticism I consider below.

A prevalent notion of autonomy today is the *coherentist* notion, according to which an agent governs her own action if and only if she is motivated to act as she does because this motivation *coheres with* some mental state that represents her point of view on the action (Buss et al. 2018). A popular coherentist view is that an agent's viewpoint is constituted by her *higher-order desires* regarding which of her *first-order desires* moves her to act. This view has been put forth by Harry Frankfurt and Gerald Dworkin. I merely focus on Dworkin's position, looking at his 1970, 1976, and 1988 works, respectively. Before doing so, a glance at relational autonomy is needed.

3. Relational Autonomy

Relational autonomy is a notion of autonomy that aims to accommodate feminist criticism that problematises the individualism of the traditional notion of autonomy. According to said criticism, the individualistic notion of autonomy presupposes a conception of the agent as “atomistic”, ideally self-sufficient, as operating in a vacuum unaffected by social circumstances, or an abstract reasoned agent stripped of distorting influences such as emotions or relations (Buss et al. 2018). Relational autonomy attempts to take this feminist criticism into account in order to reconceptualise autonomy rather than rejecting it. Relational autonomy is not a unified notion; it is an umbrella term, where the range of perspectives are premised on a shared conviction that (1.) agents are socially embedded, and (2.) the identity of an agent is formed within the context of social relationships and

shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants such as race, class, gender, etc. (Mackenzie et al. 2000: 4-5). This shared conviction is what a notion of autonomy ought to take into account, relational autonomy theorists argue.

Specifically, the criticism raised is that the individualistic view of autonomy does not take into account that agents are in relations to others and formed in specific social contexts. According to the individualistic view, such relational aspects are even regarded as hindering autonomous agency, the criticism states. Given the scope of this paper, I cannot discuss the validity of this criticism, i.e. whether this counts for all traditional notions of autonomy, but I merely assume its relevance and that the requirements it puts forward are reasonable. However, one may question whether the mentioned aspects are at all weighty in regard to autonomy. Is it a problem if a notion of autonomy does not take relational elements into account?

I find that, indeed, any notion of autonomy that ignores relational elements is problematic. Individualistic autonomy presupposes that agents are, in their ideal form, independent. However, agents are *actually* in relevant relations to others, are fairly affected by others, want to act for the sake of others, etc. This makes individualistic autonomy doubtful: If individualistic autonomy is right, few—if any—agents can act autonomously. If one disagrees and finds this unproblematic, then this paper will be of no interest. I hold that idealization in philosophical deliberation may be beneficial, e.g. for the sake of simplicity, but should still result in concepts that are empirically adequate to at least some extent. Instead I find that it is preferable for a notion of autonomy to (1.) not be too thick, i.e. that more than only a few completely independent, self-interested agents can act autonomously nor (2.) be too empirically inadequate, i.e. being based on what actually characterizes agent. On this basis, the individualistic notion of autonomy is unsatisfactory: clearly, many of our reasons for acting are influenced by others (parents, friends, teachers, peers,

etc.), one way or another, and it seems unreasonable to deny that our social context (upbringing, socio-economic status, abilities, gender, education, etc.) affects our reasons for acting to some or a high degree.

On the basis of these considerations, I will assume that it is reasonable to require, for a plausible notion of autonomy, that it takes such conditions into account. Hence, it is crucial that a theory of autonomy does so. With this as a baseline, I will consider Dworkin's notion of autonomy with respect to how it handles relational aspects and external influential factors.

4. Dworkin on Autonomy

As Dworkin's coherentist notion of autonomy is prevalent, it is worth considering in regard to the criticism just presented. In this section, I therefore consider whether Dworkin's notion takes into account the influence of external factors, i.e. other agents and social relations. First, I briefly outline the main criteria for a notion of autonomy that Dworkin proposes and his devotion to the history/context of the agent.

According to Dworkin, the following three criteria for a theory of autonomy must be met:

1. *empirical possibility*, i.e. that agent's values are influenced by external factors;
2. *judgmental relevance*, i.e. that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing concept but a matter of more or less²⁶, and;
3. *ideological neutrality*, i.e. that not only individualistic ideologies can value autonomy (Dworkin 1988: 7-8).

Beside from these criteria, it is essential to Dworkin that the point of departure is an agent that "has a history" (ibid.: 12), who develops socially and psychologically in a given environment. With agents heavily influenced by external factors such as parents, peers, and culture, Dworkin asks how,

²⁶For an elaboration of autonomy in degrees, see Beauchamp & Faden (1996).

then, we can still talk of self-determination. He seeks a notion of the self that is to be respected, left un-manipulated, and, to a certain extent, independent and self-determining (ibid.: 11-12), while including the mentioned criteria and the contextual aspect of the autonomous agent.

Dworkin's three criteria combined with the focus on agential context already indicates that external factors play *some* role in autonomous agency for Dworkin. However, this being the basic approach to Dworkin's notion of autonomy, a deeper insight into his notion will provide a further clarification as to whether Dworkin's notion meets the criticism of Sec. 3.

4.1. Second-Order Desires

Dworkin criticises how the usual discussions of autonomy only consider the promotion and/or hindrance of the agents' *first-order desires*. This is too narrow of a focus as it neglects crucial features of agents; namely their ability to reflect upon and adopt attitudes toward their first-order desires, preferences, intentions, etc., i.e. agents' ability to have *second-order desires* about their first-order desires. Second-order desires are crucial to a plausible notion of autonomy, according to Dworkin. He points to cases where an agent is manipulated without having her beliefs interfered with, but where her (second-order) capacity and ability to reject or produce such beliefs is exogenously affected (Dworkin 1988). This aspect of second-order desires and their relevance to autonomy means that autonomy is, according to Dworkin: (1.) an *evaluative and reflective notion*, that further includes (2.) an *ability* to alter one's preferences, make the preferences effective in one's actions, and make the preferences effective because one has reflected upon them and adopted them as *one's own* (Ibid.).

4.2. Procedural Independence and Authenticity

Dworkin's notion of autonomy thus requires the aspect of second-order reflections. Such reflections may be influenced by other agents or social

circumstances in ways by which the agent no longer view the reflections as being their own. To view them as one's own, Dworkin calls *procedural independence*. It is, according to Dworkin, a necessary condition for autonomy that the agent identifies with or rejects her reasons for action, i.e. is procedurally independent (Dworkin 1988: 17). Procedural independence must be understood in relation to a notion of *authenticity*. Authenticity is often considered in regard to autonomy, and Dworkin touches upon it by example of a smoker: an agent can desire to smoke, but she can also desire to desire to smoke. If the agent does not desire to have the desire to smoke, she will, most likely, attempt to stop smoking. Despite that the new behaviour (not smoking) is not under her voluntary control (as she desires to smoke), she may *want to be motivated* in this way. When her second-order desires are aligned with her first-order desires, she sees the causal influences as *hers*. The part of her that desires to stop smoking is recognized as her authentic *true self*; i.e. the one whose desires she wants to see carried out (Dworkin 1976: 24). If, on the other hand, the agent resents her being motivated in this specific way, is alienated from these influences, etc., the causal influences are not *hers*. Hence, according to Dworkin, there is an authentic version of oneself. This authentic self affects Dworkin's notion of autonomy as follows:

1. a second-order capacity of agents to reflect and evaluate critically upon their first-order desires (cf. Sec. 4.1), and;
2. the capacity to accept or change first-order desires in the light of the second-order desires given *procedural independence* (cf. present section).

Under this definition, external factors influencing the agent's reasons do not necessarily render actions unautonomous, as long as the agent has the ability to reflect and evaluate her second-order desires and as long as there is an authenticity to her reasons. On this basis, the presence of external intervention, e.g. other agents' influence on one's reasons, does not render

the actions based on affected reasons unautonomous (Dworkin 1970). On the contrary, as we will see in the following section, such external intervention seems compatible with autonomous action on Dworkin's view.

5. Dworkin's Coherentism and Relational Autonomy

Seemingly, Dworkin holds a relational notion of autonomy by taking the agent's *attitude toward acting for a certain kind of reason* to be relevant for autonomy (Dworkin 1970), while allowing external influential factors (in contrast to individualistic autonomy). Dworkin's definition allows (and acknowledges) external factors to influence the agent's reasons, while retaining autonomy. One may worry whether the notion is too thin: are there ever external forces that hinder autonomous action? Dworkin's notion is not too thin: moral causation can only succeed if the agent accepts certain fundamental principles (e.g. moral principles) and given procedural independence, the agent is acting on the basis of reasons of her own. Accepting such principles is accepting new reasons for acting, and the agent has thus already accepted the legitimacy of certain motivations (Ibid.). As Dworkin says about the autonomous agent: "His devotion is his own. He chooses it, or, at all event, approves it" (Dworkin 1988: 24).

A further indication that Dworkin's position is relational rather than individualistic is his adherence to the agent being strongly bonded with other agents. According to Dworkin, agents recognize others as "independent centres of consciousness" (ibid.: 32) and "as *them*" (ibid.), from which it follows that the agent is required to give weight to the way others define and value the world in deciding how she should act (ibid.). Dworkin's notion of autonomy, thus, does not conflict with other values, e.g. loyalty, and the influence of others on the agent's actions does not entail non-autonomy.

Finally, Dworkin argues that autonomous action is related to a particular explanation of *why* an agent obeys a given command, which

shows a relational aspect of his notion of autonomy. For Dworkin, autonomy concerns a relationship between the agent's behaviour and their motivational structure. The explanation of the agent's behaviour can refer to a broad set of mental elements (desires, intentions, etc.), while allowing us to explain behaviour via social class, culture, relations to other agents, upbringing etc. Once autonomy is viewed in this way, the traditional notion is inadequate, Dworkin argues (Dworkin 1976). It makes no sense, he claims, to view an agents' motivations etc. as merely self-selected, as it presupposes the agent is isolated from any influences and chooses arbitrarily. Insisting on such a notion makes autonomy impossible, according to Dworkin (ibid.: 24). An autonomous agent is motivated by external factors, but she is able to formulate an attitude towards the factors in question.

This final point permeates Dworkin's work on autonomy. Its focus on the agent's "inner life" may raise the worry that Dworkin's notion of autonomy is an expression of an *internalist* view. If that is so, Dworkin's notion of autonomy cannot rightly be said to perfectly be a relational notion of autonomy.

5.1. Internalism and Externalism

Dworkin's position seems compatible with relational autonomy and the criticism it raises. It is, however, worth considering if this is still the case when looking closely at the psychological aspect of autonomy. One can argue that for a notion of autonomy to be completely compatible with the relational notion, the position must be externalist. Hence, Dworkin's position must be externalist. This section, therefore, first shortly argues why a relational notion is externalist, and then considers whether Dworkin's position is externalist despite his focus on the inner life of the autonomous agent.

Internalism is opposed to *externalism*, both being positions concerning the psychological aspect of autonomy. Internalism holds that there are only *internal reasons* for action; an agent's motivation depends entirely on her present mental structure (e.g. first and second-order desires) and given that the capacities are in place and exercised properly, everything else is irrelevant to autonomy (Mele 1995; Weimer 2009). Externalism, on the other hand, holds that there *are* external reasons for action, which an agent can have even if the action is not part of the agent's subjective motivational set. Thus, according to externalism, factors external to said mental structure must be taken into consideration as well; there is more to being autonomous over time than what goes on *within* a person during that time. Autonomy may depend upon e.g. how an agent came to possess certain values and desires that guide self-reflection, according to externalism (Mele 1995).

Relational autonomy rarely focuses on the constituents of autonomous agency, but rather on the conditions under which it is possible for one to be an autonomous agent (Mackenzie et al. 2000). Nevertheless, relational autonomy holds that we cannot distinguish between the mental states internal and external to an agent's point of view, without appealing to her social relations. Further, a shared understanding of what is important plays a role in determining whether the influence of a given attitude is attributable to the agent herself (ibid.: footnote 10). Due to these elements of relational autonomy, it seems externalist. Relational autonomy holds an externalist view in that the division of psychological conditions into kinds is not ahistorical nor context-independent.

A criticism of the idea behind second-order desires regarding autonomy is then relevant: if the perspectives from which an agent critically reflects upon her first-order desires at a time is dominated by values produced by brainwashing (in a way that dictates the results of her reflection), it is difficult to view the reflection as autonomously conducted

(Mele 1995: 147-57). Further, one could argue that external factors can prevent an agent's reasoning from qualifying as a mode of self-rule by preventing the agent from developing the self-trust that is necessary for forming a viewpoint that is truly her own (Benson 1994: 651-2). So can a notion of autonomy, focusing on second-order desires and authenticity, be externalist? If Dworkin's position is not externalist, it is not completely compatible with relational autonomy.

5.2. Dworkin and Internalism

As Dworkin attaches great importance to first and second-order desires, mental states play a crucial role to his notion of autonomy. It is tempting to say, then, that Dworkin's coherentist notion of autonomy is internalist. Nevertheless, his coherentism is special. The way Dworkin includes these states is not ahistorical or relation-independent. Unlike the coherentist Frankfurt, who writes "the questions of how the actions and his identifications with their springs are caused are irrelevant to the questions of whether he performs the actions freely" (Frankfurt 1988: 54), Dworkin develops a coherentist view that

- a) allows that sometimes the autonomous agent might autonomously do something that she does not want to do due to external factors, and;
- b) takes as important *how* the autonomous agent obtains her reasons.

These factors, I will argue, are (along with the criteria and the focus on the agential context mentioned in Sec. 4.) indicating an externalist position.

Regarding a., Dworkin stresses that we may do things that run counter to our first-order desires due to e.g. obligations from others. In such cases, it is obvious that the intervention of external factors does not render the action non-autonomous (Dworkin 1976: 376). But sometimes an agent chooses to act in a fashion she would not choose had the reasons (provided by others) not been created. Whether this is manipulation, force, etc.

depends on whether the agent assimilates the reasons to herself. Sometimes we act simply to avoid unpleasant consequences with no attendant promotion of our own interest; sometimes we do not mind acting for reasons which fall under the heading of reciprocity, obligations, etc. (ibid.). Hence, according to Dworkin, sometimes we form reasons based on external factors, act from these reasons even though we do not want to, while still acting autonomously. This seems inconsistent with the internalist view, as the internalist view claims that everything but one's own reflection of one's reasons accounts for autonomy. In Dworkin's case, one's reflection plays a huge role, but the external influences may play as big a role. He does not separate one's own reflection that harshly from the external factors, though, they do play an independent role regarding autonomous action.

Regarding b., the same conclusion may be drawn. Concerning the question of *how* the agent got her reasons, Dworkin clarifies the relationship between identifying something as being one's desire and the mode of *acquisition* of the desire (Dworkin 1970: 369-70). Here, Dworkin distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate ways of influencing other agents' minds (Dworkin 1988: 11). To the influenced agents, these are external factors. Hence, asking how agents got their reasons indicates externalism, as it allows external factors and context to influence even autonomous action. The internalist view requires that there are no external reasons for autonomous action. Hence, Dworkin's position cannot be internalist, but must be externalist.

Additionally, it is however worth considering Dworkin's notion of a *true self*. Occasionally, such a true self may seem to be independent of external factors, providing reasons for action that are fully internal. This notion may seem—at least to a certain extent—internalist, as it seems independent of external factors and the agent's context. It is not clear, from Dworkin's work, to what extent these external factors and the reasons they provide, need to *adhere* to the true self, a true self which is pre-defined

independently. If one interprets Dworkin's position as claiming that the reasons provided by external factors must adhere to already defined "real" attitudes of the agent, which are only provided internally, Dworkin's notion seems to be internalist in that respect. Nonetheless, I find it reasonable not to interpret Dworkin's notion of authenticity and true self in such a way; in all of the considered works by Dworkin, he puts a remarkable weight on the historical context and social circumstances of the agent. The focus on internal aspects of the agent—i.e. the weight given to the agent's inner life in the form of first- and second-order desires—are used in a way that *emphasizes* the external influences as being unproblematic for autonomy. As seen in his work, and throughout this paper, Dworkin's point of departure, his aim and his points of using the inner life of the agent, is not an expression of internalism. External factors play a huge, if not the most important, role for the reasons for action, and this is, due to the role of second-order desires, not a problem—it does not prevent autonomous action, according to Dworkin.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that relational autonomy is a plausible notion of autonomy, and that its criticism towards the traditional, individualistic notion of autonomy is reasonable. I concluded that external factors—e.g. other agents and social relations—may influence an agent's reasons for action without hindering autonomy of such actions. I concluded that a plausible notion of autonomy must, as is the case with relational autonomy, take into account external factors and the social context of the agent, rather than assuming the autonomous agent to be atomistic, self-sufficient and independent.

I have discussed whether the contemporary prevalent notion of autonomy—namely Dworkin's coherentism—meets the said criticism, i.e. whether the position is relational and externalist. I concluded that Dworkin's notion of autonomy is indeed (given a certain interpretation of

his notion of a true self) a relational, externalist notion of autonomy, hence I conclude that Dworkin's notion of autonomy is not affected by the criticism put forward by relational autonomy against the traditional, individualistic notion of autonomy.

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