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Personal autonomy and political freedom

– Thesis Summary –

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1. Aim and Subject

Autonomy is one of the central concepts of contemporary moral and political philosophy. Due to historical reasons and the diversity of perspectives from which it has been looked upon, autonomy has several meanings, dimensions and interpretations, yet so far as I know there is as yet no all-embracing, comprehensive work about it. In my dissertation I aim at a more comprehensive discussion than other authors. Some thinkers, problems and applied ethical questions (such as the problem of informed consent in medical ethics) can only be hinted at. As an important but accessory thread I deal with the liberal tradition and its critiques because of its close relationship with autonomy, for the major sources of reference are to be found at the beginnings of this tradition and according to my final thesis it is this tradition that provides the key to the reconsideration of the whole problem. Questions concerning value plurality are similarly inescapable. Further, respective notions of personality must be mentioned when analyzing various thinkers and currents of thought.

Etymologically, the word *autonomy* derives from *autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule or law). Self-governance, self-regulation, self-direction and self-control is the common core of multiple interpretations, expressing governance from inside and self-possession, that is, our behaviour is regulated by rules, reasons and motivations set by ourselves or assented to by ourselves, not by external factors, manipulation, delusion or coercion. Autonomy thus conceived is the source of morality and a fundamental constituent of human nature. It is an important element of self-esteem and is linked to competency; from Kant onwards it is the basis of respect for human beings as ends in themselves and the bearer of human dignity (though the fate-choosing dignity of the soul appeared already in early Christianity). The concept had been introduced into the history of Western thought by Kant, but it was J. S. Mill who elevated it to the rank of fundamental yet much-debated value of liberal political philosophy. It became part and parcel of modern theories of personality (see for example H. Frankfurt's hierarchical theory of personality), and proved fundamental in the psychological researches concerning moral development and healthy psychological functioning. Yet the existence of sub-conscious motivations draws attention to the fact that full autonomy is

unattainable: autonomy is more of a matter of degree, a kind of continuum, and beyond that, an ideal.

Autonomy can be described in multiple ways: as obedience to laws set by ourselves (the famous Kantian, strong sense of autonomy which is in concordance with the word's etymology); as control above our own hierarchical system of desires (Frankfurt); as freedom from external coercion, manipulation, slavery, illegitimate authority, paternalism, from the "tyranny of the majority" or that of "customs," from fate and destiny, God's arbitrary will, material needs, "false consciousness," passions and inordinate desires (e.g. addictions and the mentality of mass consumption, particularly actual phenomenon.)

The objective of my dissertation is to show, within the framework of the history of ideas, the diverse historical meanings, varieties and interpretations of the concept of autonomy, its earliest appearances and the crystallization of its modern meanings. One of its main dimensions, autonomy conceived as free will and free decision opposed as it is to fate, is present in philosophical thought from the very beginning of ancient Greek philosophy. Theological reformulations and versions of this idea were articulated in Christianity, although the theological aspect had been present from the start. Even in the case of Kant the metaphysical aspect is unmistakable (see the third antinomy of pure reason, that is, the problem of freedom and necessity with regard to causality).

The term autonomy derives from 17th and 18th century tracts that described states as self-governing entities. Yet it must be noted that the original Greek word had always appeared in a political context too, most often in the context of the self-governing polis possessing independent legislature. Following the analysis of John M. Cooper, who traces the first appearances of the word as referring to individuals rather than to city-states back to the works of Sophocles, Xenophon, and Isocrates, I concur that Dion Chrysostom's notion of autonomy is analogue to that of Kant in several respects. Moreover, Dion's is an independent and original concept. He was the first to discover the individual autonomy as distinct from the autonomy of the political community, establishing the idea of the rational being capable both of abiding the cosmic law and of governing itself.

Plato and Aristotle formulated views that foreshadowed the notion of autonomy. Examples include the respectful ideal exemplified by the figure of Socrates in Plato's

dialogue *Crito*; the radically individualistic, albeit subsequently abandoned interpretation of the *homo mensura* thesis in the dialogue *Theaitetos*; or the thoughts found in the 3rd book of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* about intention, consciousness and responsibility. (A partial criticism of the omnipotence of determinism can be found in Plato's *Phaedo*; Aristotle's famous exposition of the problem of the future sea fight in his *Hermeneutics* is fundamental in the discussion of autonomy as opposed to fate.)

I regard Origen as an indispensable thinker on account of his overall originality and of the exceptionally high value he placed on the creatures' autonomy, which in his case goes beyond the freedom to choose one's fate. His concept of autonomy determines the rank one has in the ontological hierarchy and thus the proportion of the diverse kinds of rational creatures inhabiting the cosmos. We are placed in the rank of angels, demons, planet-moving intelligences or human beings as a result of our initial decisions. (The most perfect and beautiful example for pre-existent decision is the one made by Christ's human soul, which is at the same time the subject of the endeavours of all pre-existent *nous*.) The philosophy of Saint Augustine is also fundamental because of its scope and relevance which is still unquestionable today. His works testify the birth of the modern concepts of will and personality, the systematization of the depravity of human nature and of original sin, and the theological justification of "enforcing freedom." The dissociation of the order of nature from the order of grace (which can be traced back to Saint Augustine, was elaborated in the middle ages and advanced in a radical form by the reformation thinkers), the mature concept of law proposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas (human law can independently govern those things not encompassed by the divine law) and the associated problem of *adiaphora* foreshadow the modern concept of autonomy. Not until early modernity was the real relevance of things indifferent with regard to religion and salvation discovered, and soon it was placed in the focus of debates in political philosophy, leading to the inception of the ideal of the rational and autonomous individual, liberated from the burden of original sin, possessing critical reflexivity, and capable of creating an independent and rational society and political establishment.

In my dissertation I attempt to distinguish the various concepts of freedom and to describe the major sorts of political liberty, I touch upon the problem of voluntarism and intellectualism, briefly sketch the fundamentals of the natural rights tradition and as

a short excursion I discuss whether God and the Satan can be regarded as autonomous agents. According to my thesis the voluntaristic aspect of God points to the theoretically unbounded character of his absolute power, yet only intellectualism can be in accord with his nature. In a thought experiment partially inspired by Origen I suggest that Lucifer is God's true prodigal son on the cosmic scale, whose return to his Father is thus necessary and as predestined as was his fall.

It is unquestionable that it was Kant who transformed autonomy into a central concept in moral and political philosophy and it is also doubtless that his version became exceedingly important and immensely influential. Yet I believe that it was not Kant, neither the Neo-Kantians (among whom I include Robert Paul Wolff, Robert Nozick and John Rawls) who constructed a notion of autonomy which is not purely formal, which is capable of working in the empirical world and which can take into consideration individual differences and plurality of values. This aim was achieved by John Stuart Mill (even if Isaiah Berlin or Nozick's thoughts of meta-utopia went far beyond him). The philosophical framework of Mill's thought is his qualitative utilitarianism; nevertheless, as John Gray convincingly argued, it is in fact an indirect utilitarianism free from most usual defects characteristic of utilitarianism, and it provides firm ground for Mill's claims. Gray's subsequent criticisms, as well as the communitarian ones, however, seriously challenge the liberal concepts of autonomy and the theory of personality built on it. The great question is, then, whether this ideal can be defended somehow.

2. Literary Background

In my investigations I used primary and secondary literature, original texts, translations and monographs. In the historical discussion of moral philosophy from the Middle Ages to Kant Jerome B. Schneewind's monumental monograph is the main point of reference (*The Invention of Autonomy*, Cambridge University Press, 1998). The book's thesis is that although Kant's thoughts on moral philosophy were revolutionary (Kant in fact "invented" the notion of morality as autonomy), yet they did not stand without historical precedence. During this history morality conceived as obedience (towards God, church

and state) was gradually replaced by morality conceived as self-direction. By the beginning of the 18th century it became clear that a new morality is needed based on self-governance in order to secure the individual value and dignity of human beings. Yet we can go back even to earlier times than the Middle Ages (Schneewind rarely mentions ancients; for example in connection with natural rights Cicero). The fundamental Scriptural locus is Romans 2,14-15. For Dion and the earliest precedents John M. Cooper's excellent paper is indispensable (*Stoic Autonomy*, in: Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller & Jeffrey Paul [ed.]: *Autonomy*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 1–30). For Origen, Róbert Somos's monograph is essential (*Az alexandriai teológia [The Alexandrian School of Theology]*, Paulus Hungarus – Kairosz, Budapest, 2001). For the investigation of autonomy as contrasted to determinism, fate and divine foreknowledge up to the second century AD the collection edited by István Bugár and Péter Lautner is invaluable (*Sors és szabadság [Fate and Freedom]*, Kairosz Kiadó, Budapest, 2006). For the Middle Ages I relied on Étienne Gilson's superb book (*A középkori filozófia szelleme [Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy]*, Paulus Hungarus – Kairosz, 2000). His huge merit is the reintroduction of this neglected age into the European history of ideas, yet his effort to derive modernity immediately from the philosophy of Aquinas is now to be treated with caution. I deem fundamental the works of John Gray who after his defence of Millian liberalism (*Mill on Liberty: A Defence*, Routledge, London, 1996) posed serious and thought-provoking challenges to it and to liberalism in general, accompanied by increasing radicalism. As to hierarchical theory of personality I relied on Harry G. Frankfurt and Gerald Dworkin, as well as on the bioethicist Thomas May's remarkable concept of autonomy, based on Aristotle's steersman metaphor. Beyond these – and without aiming at completeness – I owe much to the works of such excellent scholars as Ernst Cassirer, Henry Chadwick, Albrecht Dihle, Charles Kahn, Christopher Stead, Peter Brown, Jean Hampton, Gábor Kendeffy, Gábor Borbély, Béla Mester, Ferenc Horkay Hörcher and Mária Ludassy. In the last chapter I analyze the thoughts of Erich Fromm and Abraham Maslow.

3. Methodology

I do not intend to provide a complete history of concept and problems, as it would be an exaggerated aspiration and an unattainable goal within the given limits. My objective is to discuss and analyze the most characteristic systems and debates. It is undeniable that the estimation of the relative importance of the various authors depends in part on the prejudices, sympathies, interpretations and subjective preferences of the author of the present dissertation. Due to obvious limitations on length, at some occasions I can only pick up the most important facets from a given tradition's or author's relevant views, whereas at other times I venture to explore a problem in greater depth. When I deem necessary I intersperse sub-chapters for the sake of clarification or systematization, as in the case of the concept of will and the possible kinds of freedom.

4. Results

I did not propose any radical claim in my dissertation, neither is it my intention to reinterpret a thinker or a current of thought. I attempt to discuss all the traditions, thinkers and approaches and aspects connected to the problem of autonomy in a systematic way, and to eventually link the doctrine of modern political philosophy with psychological points of view. The combined philosophical and psychological findings led me to realise that autonomy is not a given attribute, nor is it an On/Off characteristic, rather it is a state which can only be achieved gradually and whose level is dependent on a host of other factors (such as consciousness, competence, self-esteem etc.) Similarly, moral development proceeds from heteronomy to autonomy. This is in line with Paul Guyer's Kant-interpretation. The communitarian critics of Rawls pointed out that the point-like individual stripped of its objectives and values is untenable (although even the original Rawlsian scheme is more sophisticated than that). Erich Fromm similarly drew our attention to the relevance unconscious motivations have with regard to our freedom, whose level is different in different situations. He also emphasized the way our decisions, themselves depending on our character-structures which substitute for our animal instincts, help fixing the structure of our tendency-level

decisions-making behaviour which determine the productiveness or opportunism of our actions. (The hardened heart of the pharaoh exemplifies how our liberty can be totally lost as a result of multiple consecutive erroneous decisions.) Abraham Maslow's psychological investigations concluded that for a healthy life adequate environment and an economic minimum (food, housing, fair treatment) is absolutely pre-requisite. He also confirmed that, in accordance with Mill, the self-realizing person is creative, innovative and autonomous. Moreover, only a person like this is able to meet the Kantian requirement that one ought not to use Other as a means (as a means of one's own psychic needs), only as an end in itself.

5. Conclusion

Taking into account the conservative and communitarian critiques of Mill and Rawls, linking Mill's concept with the contextualized interpretation of Kant's concept of autonomy, with Raz's perfectionist theory and a sophisticated version of Rawls's Neo-Kantian notion of personality we obtain a concept which is in perfect concordance with the results of the humanistic psychology. Frankl's logotherapy and Maslow's model of self-actualization take into consideration the innermost core of personality which is capable of self-determination, which is able to liberate itself from its particular circumstances, value system and culture. It is empirically verified that the autonomous personality which unfolds its own possibilities from its own nature is healthier in mental terms than those who do not conduct an autonomous life. Erich Fromm's insights are also fundamental in this regard: he does not hold the aggressive instinct deriving from death instinct (considered as independent by Freud) as an original and primitive element in our nature. It is a derivative phenomenon which grows proportionally to the degree of restrictions obviating the realization of the possibilities of human life. It becomes a destructive motivation only as a result of an un-lived life and of the defeat of the marginalized life instinct. In this light it is plausible that a Mill-interpretation, modified in a communitarian direction and enhanced in its Aristotelian element (the social matrix that encourages the exercise of the "higher" capacities, that is a virtuous life) which at the same time retains its emphasis on the sphere of negative liberty and on the

individually diverse human nature, is able to keep itself at a distance from the extremes of atomistic individualism on the one hand, and from the collectivist, overwhelmingly paternalistic society, on the other. At the same time this interpretation is in accordance with the findings of psychological research concerning healthy human personality. In my final conclusion, a Millian, value-based, moderately perfectionist, liberal vision of society which at the same time guarantees the conditions necessary for the realization of individual liberty, creativity and uniqueness while incorporating communitarian elements can be a suitable amalgam that can serve as a point of departure towards reformulating the concept of a wholesome social formation. Furthermore, this interpretation may provide convincing arguments for the defence of a sophisticated liberal concept of autonomy.

6. Bibliography

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