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Autonomy, Reason, and Knowledge of the Good

Some philosophers, like Brad Hooker, believe that the main elements of welfare have intrinsic value, therefore, do not require external support for them to positively contribute to a person's well-being. Philosopher Chris Heathwood, on the other hand, disagrees with this position and argues that welfare is subjective insofar as the main elements of well-being rely on the individual having an "actual" desire for them before they can be considered beneficial (9). This position becomes problematic, however, when we include autonomy in this debate because it threatens our ability to stay connected to our natural rights since autonomy concerns our capacity to develop reason and reasoned speech, hence, our freedom as well. In this paper I will argue against Hooker's claim that important knowledge and autonomy are separable and why living a morally good life must be considered a constitutive element of well-being.

Since there are many different contexts in which one may understand the concept of autonomy, I will start with a brief etymology of the word before introducing a definition of this term that is in harmony with the realm of value theory and the framework from which this definition was formed. The word autonomy is derived from the ancient Greek word *autos*, meaning "self", and *nomos*, meaning "rule" or "law" which translates to self-governance or self-control essentially (Motloba 418). Value theory generally honours this literal translation and understands it as the capacity to govern or control oneself. However, because our language must evolve alongside the evolution of our species, many contemporary moral philosophers have

redefined it in terms that reflect our species' sociological evolution and the social contracts that underlay our current conceptions of autonomy. For example, one current day scholar in the field defines autonomy as "the ability to act independently, responsibly and with conviction" (Motloba 418). And while this definition aligns with what many of us understand to be autonomous decision making, it (like many other current definitions of autonomy) presupposes three things. First, that there is "good" judgement, second, that there is a "correct" way to act, and third, that one's faculty of reason has developed to the extent that they are able to make "good" judgements and act responsibly (or "correctly"). This means that one must have developed the capacity to think and speak rationally and have acquired knowledge of what exactly "the good" is before they can properly exercise their autonomy.

In "The Elements of Well-Being" Hooker argues that two of the main elements of well-being are important knowledge and autonomy and that these elements "are good for us in [their] own right" (1) because they do not depend on any other elements to be valuable. And while it is nice to think of autonomy as an objective element with intrinsic value, his conclusion is derived from a thought experiment that relies on the assumption that more of something *must* be better for us while neglecting the quality of the thing in question. Hooker claims that an element's intrinsic worth can be determined simply by comparing two lives that contain different amounts of it, deciding if the life with more "of the candidate good" (4) is more beneficial than the life with less, and then "inquir[ing] what is the right explanation of this life's being more beneficial" (4). He begins with a hypothesis that pleasure is an element of well-being and says that this can be proved correct provided that its rival explanations are found erroneous. In the case of innocent pleasure, he says that the leading rival possible explanation for why a life with more of it would be more beneficial than a life with less would be that the life with more "also contained a larger

amount of significant achievement or friendship or important knowledge or autonomy” (5). This would mean that the above listed elements were the primary cause of the extra pleasure rather than the pleasure itself, therefore, innocent pleasure is not necessarily an element of welfare (5). However, Hooker says that since we do not know anything about the sources of pleasure in this case (since the possible explanation presupposes that the achievement was significant, the knowledge important etc.), this explanation is thus invalidated because, according to Hooker, “there is no necessity that the source of innocent pleasure is itself valuable” (5). He argues that the same test can also be applied to important knowledge which means that his conclusion that important knowledge is an element of well-being is derived from a test that does not care about whether the source of important knowledge is indeed legitimate or not.

In addition to the source of this important knowledge needing to be of good quality, specific knowledge of “the good” must also be included so that one may show “good” judgement in their autonomous actions and decision making. Since knowledge of “the good” is indeed important information, this means that autonomy cannot be separated from important knowledge if it is to benefit welfare. However, because important knowledge relating to moral virtue (“the good”) is not gained equally, it means that there will always be degrees to which the good will be expressed (or not expressed) by individuals, and consequently the degree to which individuals will be able to exercise their autonomy in any given society. Furthermore, many extrinsic factors e.g., neurological disorders, language barriers, upbringing etc. may also affect one’s capacity to grasp this important knowledge in a way that will benefit their well-being. This does not mean that autonomy and important knowledge do not have intrinsic value, it simply means that many extrinsic factors can affect the degree to which one is able to gain important knowledge and exercise their autonomy.

In *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* John Locke dedicates several chapters to the concept of autonomy and the ways in which paternal and political power are connected to this development in relation to natural law. He says that "freedom from absolute, arbitrary power, is so necessary to, and closely joined with [human] preservation, that [they] cannot part with it..." (Locke 42). Meaning, that our ability to act independently is not only an element of our well-being, but also, a natural human right. This truth runs parallel to his principles concerning paternal power and the "rule and jurisdiction" that parents have over their children. He says that "natural freedom and subjection to parents may consist together, and are both founded on the same principle" (Locke 59) which suggests that we cannot be considered free or rational beings until we can exercise this rationality and free will which occur synchronously. Locke also explains how the development of rational thought is connected to his theory and why a free will can only exist in combination with a certain degree of reason. He also acknowledges the fact that there can sometimes be "defects" which prevent one from achieving such a degree of reason, therefore, cannot exercise their free will either. In this context, the word "defects" is referring to a situation in which the child is guided by the will of their guardian who understands the law for them, and is therefore "under the tuition and government of others" (Locke 58) because they have not come to know the law themselves. In this case, autonomy is compromised because important knowledge has not been imparted onto the child in a way that will benefit their welfare, thus, autonomy and important knowledge are not separable elements of well-being in this case.

Hooker insists that living a morally good life is not an element of well-being and refers to it as a "property" that one's life may "lack" instead of including it in his list of "elements" that he finds to be more objective (9). He says that this conclusion is based on what he refers to as

“the sympathy test” in which a candidate element’s intrinsic worth is determined by whether we feel sympathy for one who lacks the element in question. However, Hooker’s inference rests on the presumption that “we do not feel sympathy for people who fail to live morally good lives” (9) which not only undermines the concept of autonomy itself because it imposes both a judgement and feeling on behalf of others (therefore, has the potential to distort and/or manipulate the feelings of others as well), but it is also undermines his claim that friendship is a main element of well-being since true friendships depends on the moral goodness of each friend in the relationship. Thus, living a morally good life is already embedded into the element of friendship and does not require a separate distinction to secure its validity within value theory. Furthermore, if living a morally good life is considered “property” as Hooker suggests, according to Locke’s natural law theory, we inherently possess the right to both have and protect this way of living.

Finally, to test the strength of my position, I will now present an objection to my argument that seeks to invalid my claims. Imagine a civilization in which positive law has not yet been established. Morality is relative insofar as there is no such thing as objective “good”, therefore, it is acceptable to steal, cheat, lie, murder etc. Since the standard for freedom is extremely low in this community, inhabitants have a very limited understanding of “autonomy” and define it as “the freedom to move without any physical constraints”. If they are free to move, they are exercising their autonomy basically. From their experience, the more they have of this sort of autonomy, the better, which means that the quantity of their autonomy is more important than the quality of it. Since there are no moral ideals in this civilization, there is no important knowledge to be either gained or lost. As a result, important knowledge and autonomy are separable and do not rely on each other for support. Furthermore, living a morally good life

would not be an element of well-being in this civilization because the concept of “virtue” does not exist, therefore, inhabitants who behave virtuously do not gain anything either personally or professionally by doing so.

Although, this scenario provides us with an example of a situation in which autonomy and important knowledge are separable, living a morally good life may still have beneficial affects on the souls of the inhabitants in this civilization whether they realize it or not. Furthermore, just because the inhabitants can move freely, it does not follow that they are able to think or speak freely since we do not know the degree to which they are being verbally, emotionally, or psychologically influenced and/or coerced. The narrower the definition of “autonomy”, the easier it will be to exercise unfortunately.

Important knowledge and Autonomy have intrinsic value because they are indirectly connected with our inherent rights to freedom (including thought and speech), property, and life which are grounded in natural law. However, for autonomy to coincide with our positive laws and social conventions, reason must be free to develop to its full potential and all persons in each society must have equal knowledge of the good. Not only does this mean that important knowledge is inseparable from autonomy, but also, that the source of this important knowledge must be honourable and trustworthy. When autonomy and important knowledge of the good maintain a strong connection, living a morally good life will be a natural, and therefore, inseparable development.

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