2015

Review of Autonomy by Andrew Snodden

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Publisher’s Statement

This review has been accepted for publication in Metapsychology Online Reviews, Vol. 18, Issue 39, 2014. http://metapsychology.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=book&id=7250&cn=394

Repository Citation

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Andrew Sneddon’s *Autonomy* seeks to explore the nature of autonomy with a focus on the psychological capacities that most humans develop through during their lives and the role they play in our lives. The book is divided into eight chapters, with the early chapters devoted to offering a robust account of autonomy, while the latter chapters are focused on the value of autonomy.

The first chapter is an introduction to autonomy. The next two chapters offer a partial account of the autonomy of persons. Chapter four explores theories in psychology that might undermine this theory of autonomy. Chapter five argues that autonomy is both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable. Chapters six and seven explore the relationship between personal autonomy and paternalism and political autonomy. Finally, in chapter eight the author argues that autonomy is omnirelevant.

Whether the author has made a substantial contribution to the philosophical discussion of autonomy stands or falls on the account of autonomy he presents in the first chapter. Here Sneddon distinguishes between four types of control: (i) *autonomy*, or self-rule; (ii) *heteronomy*, or rule by others; (iii) *cosmonomy*, or rule by non-persons; and (iv) *oudenonomy*, or rule...
by nothing.

Oddly, the author contends that one can "embrace heteronomy", suggesting that slavery - whether entered freely, or by force - constitutes heteronomy; however it strikes me that this is a mistake. (9) While some slaves may have their wills broken and become heteronomous, it strikes me that most slaves are autonomous in the relevant sense, even if they choose to follow the commands of others as a means to avoid retribution for disobedience.

According to Sneddon, an agent is cosmonomous if her actions are causally determined by her environment. He asks us to picture a frog that has been causally determined to stick its tongue out whenever it spots a fly. However, this account of cosmonomy is equally applicable to the standard compatibilist account of human action, where compatibilists believe that moral responsibility is compatible with determinism. If the theory of universal causal determinism is true, then everything is completely causally determined by the laws of nature and the actual past, our actions would not be autonomous, but cosmonomous. Thus, it seems, the author’s account of autonomy is inconsistent with compatibilist theories of agency.

The author’s distinction between heteronomy and cosmonomy is instrumentally valuable in some sense, however in both cases the agent's choices are being causally determined by external forces. For the Pavlovianly conditioned slave, they are caused to act by the fear of their master’s whip; for the frog they are caused to act by the sight of a fly passing by.

Lastly, for the author, an agent’s choice would beoudenonomous if she acted on whim alone. While this account might be compelling, it would not be difficult to offer a deterministic account of human whims such that oudenonomy would be reducible to cosmonomy. A better example of oudenonomy would be what incompatibilist philosopher Robert Kane calls a self-forming action. According to Kane moral agency requires at least partial indeterminism, but that our psychological processes are mostly deterministic. However, in some special scenarios he contends that human beings can make undetermined, inherently arbitrary, choices -- self-forming actions -- actions that we are later causally determined to embrace as part of our self or distance ourselves from. The author’s account of autonomy is inconsistent with Kane’s model of indeterminism.

If this analysis is correct, autonomy on the author’s view is neither compatible with universal causal determinism or arbitrary indeterminism; autonomy require non-arbitrary indeterminism, perhaps consistent with what some incompatibilists call agent control.

A systematic shortcoming in this work is that the author fails to use technical language, or refer the large body of literature concerning autonomy, with almost no mention of the robust metaphysical debate at the heart of academic literature on autonomy. The author’s account of autonomy is woefully imprecise and underdeveloped.

The best example of this incompleteness comes later in the first chapter, when the author seeks to distinguish autonomy from things it is not. Autonomy is distinct from political autonomy, authenticity, moral autonomy, and moral responsibility, the author contends. Moral philosophers tend to agree to that moral agency requires the ability to be morally responsible for one's free actions.
According to most ethicists, it makes sense to hold someone morally responsible for her actions if and if her actions are up to her. But this just is to say that moral agency requires self-control, or autonomy!

Sneddon admits that most autonomous agents are moral agents; however he contends that "It is conceivable... to think of people who are capable of running their lives but who are, in one way or another, not morally responsible agents." (6) It is not clear what the author means here - one possibility is that the author means that some autonomous moral agents contingently might not be morally responsible for anything - for example, if I were to clone myself and copy and paste my memories into that clone, but never wake that clone from its artificial coma, then the clone would be a (potential) moral agent that is contingently not morally responsible for anything. However, this does not appear to be the highly technical point the author is making. He continues, "Some psychopaths might be like this. Depending on the psychological details of their psychopathy, they might be sufficiently insensible to moral standards as to be unfit for assessment in those terms." This strikes me as absurd!

There is somewhat of a caricature of psychopaths in contemporary literature as amoral autonomous agents who are, for whatever reason, incapable of understanding moral concepts. One popular account is that psychopaths lack empathy, or the ability to mirror the emotions of other people. Normal people, the story goes, don't senselessly harm others because when they see others in pain it makes them feel bad; psychopaths without empathy, however, would have no such deterrent. However, this psychopath still has access to plenty of moral cues!

Remember that for Sneddon, to act arbitrarily is to act udenonomously, not autonomously. So by stipulation, the autonomous agent acts for reasons! In James Rachels' excellent introduction to ethics, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, he presents what he calls the minimum conception of morality; roughly the right thing to do is the thing that one has the best reasons to do, while giving equal weight to the interests of all those involved. Sneddon might believe that these psychopaths, because of their lack of empathy, lack the ability to act morally -- but not so! The psychopath has different reasons to act (by stipulation, he cannot feel empathy for others), but he still has reasons, and the right thing to do is what one has the best reasons to do! Setting aside practical reasons for moral behavior, in order for the psychopath to run their lives they must have the ability to interact with other human beings, about whom they have to have the ability to ascribe interests to, and emotional states. Some neuroatypical persons might be utterly unaware of another's emotional state and thus can't be expected to react as a neurotypical person would, but this is not to say that they have equal reason to pat them on the back as they do to stab them with a knife! Empathy is, no doubt, a useful tool, but it neither necessary nor sufficient for moral agency or moral responsibility. A psychopath might be differently morally responsible, but if they are autonomous agents, then by stipulation they must have the capacity to act for reasons, and can be judged morally in virtue of their actions.

Unfortunately Sneddon takes himself to have successfully divorced autonomy from moral agency. The rest of the book scarcely mentions the one topic that most philosophers and laymen interested in autonomy are concerned with, and
what is left is written in ambiguously without the rigor or attention to detail one expects from contemporary philosophy.

References:

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