

## Autonomy, Moral Behavior & the Self

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AUTONOMY IS VERY HIGHLY PRAISED as something that it is always good to have, and always good to have more of rather than less of.<sup>1</sup> The idea seems to be that persons should be autonomous whatever else they might be, and that should act autonomously whatever else it is that they might do. Kantians are fond of saying that a person is autonomous if she or he chooses to live in accordance with the dictates of reason. This, in turn, directly links autonomy to morality, which for Kantians is an ineliminable aspect of reason. I shall discuss this view in Section II. Of course, it is also the case that autonomy is widely heralded as a good by those who do not accept Kant's philosophical moorings. For instance, to say that women should be more autonomous is not thereby to say that they should be more embracing of this or that moral set of principles. In fact, it is not clear that this assertion pertains to acting morally at all. Autonomy, like liberty, seems to be regarded as a good whatever the philosophical leanings of people might be. In either case, the more the better.

Autonomy is so unquestionably taken as a good that it is often invoked favorably, even in passing, as a way of underscoring a point or fixing intuitions. Thus, in her 1999 Tanner Lectures, "Goodness and Advice", Judith Jarvis Thomson writes: "The relevant wants, rather, are relatively stable, resting on correct information, and *autonomously* arrived at" (my italics).<sup>2</sup> She never mentions the word again. Thomson no doubt means for the reader to understand something like the following: The wants have merit on account of the individual(s) having reflected upon and properly weighed the relevant considerations for and against the wants in question.

Respect for the autonomy of persons is heralded as a good at every turn. Thus, it is noted that one of the deep wrongs of sexism is that the autonomy of women is not respected. Likewise, the failure to respect the autonomy of blacks countenanced is one of the profound wrongs of American slavery. But is respecting the autonomy of persons always a good thing? What if the person is evil? A Stalin or a Hitler or a grand dragan of the Klu Klux Kan? Surely the thought cannot be that only morally decent people are autonomous. Referring back to Thomson, from the fact that principles are arrived at autonomously, it does not seem to follow at all that said principles will be morally defensible one. This should come as no surprise; for the claim that women should be more autonomous is not considered by anyone to be tantamount to the claim that they should be more morally decent persons. The moral decency of women has generally not been an issue. Finally, in this vein,

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Gerald Dworkin, "The Nature of Autonomy," in his *The Theory and Practice of Morality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Thomas Hill, Jr., "The Importance of Autonomy," in his *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Both authors marvelously illustrate the ways in which autonomy is taken to be important. Dworkin, though, takes a more critical stance regarding the value of autonomy than does Hill. In writing this essay, owe much to Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (The University of Notre Dame, 1984), ch. 2, "The Nature of Moral Disagreement". He reminds us that neither Socrates nor Kant is our contemporary; and I have tried to be mindful of this in talking about them with regard to autonomy.

<sup>2</sup> I referring to the on-line version which can be found at

would evil institutions such American Slavery and the Holocaust not have occurred had the denizens of these respective societies been more autonomous? The way people talk about the good of autonomy, one think that the answer to this question has to be an affirmative one. As we shall see, however, this is far from obvious.

The view that I shall defend in this essay is that autonomy is not the good that it is typically taken to be. On the one hand, I see no reason to think that evil people cannot be autonomous; on the other, I do not think that it is necessarily a strike against one if one acts morally but not autonomously. Moreover, while the idea of respecting the autonomy of persons no doubt strikes a most responsive chord in our hearts, I see nothing whatsoever in an evil course of action autonomously reached that merits respect on any level. Not only that, there are times when it can be most important to show enormous respect to a non-autonomous person. It is possible, for instance, to show great respect to a freed black slave who is still of a very servile mindset and thus one who by hypothesis has no autonomy to respect. Being autonomous does not thereby make one worthy of respect; likewise, failing to be autonomous does not thereby make one unworthy of respect.

I hold that autonomy is a good; and we all need some of it. However, it is not the moral good that it is generally construed to be. This is because autonomy, in and of itself, is neutral between good and evil. A person is neither morally better nor worse merely on account of being more rather than less autonomous. It goes without saying that the most sophisticated defense of autonomy is Kant's. Without getting involved in Kantian exegesis, I shall try to show in Section II, why autonomy as Kant conceived of it cannot work.

#### I. AUTONOMY: LESSONS FROM LIFE

The root idea of autonomy is self-rule.<sup>3</sup> Autonomous persons, then, are those who pursue their conception of the good, where this represents what they want to do rather than what others (say, parents or friends) want them to do. Accordingly, autonomous persons believe that no one can legitimately require them to pursue this or that conception of the good. Autonomous persons are the authors of their conception of the good. Bearing this in mind, lessons from life give us the servile slave as a paradigm example of a non-autonomous person, on the one hand, and Socrates and Martin Luther King, as paradigm examples of an autonomous person, on the other. I shall discuss these two paradigm examples in turn.

Regarding the servile slave, and a slave need not be servile, it is not just that the individual does not think for himself. Rather, it is that he cannot even imagine that he *should* think for himself. He has trouble imagining that he is in the position to tell himself what to do with his own life. The problem is not so much that he follows the crowd willy-nilly, for that need not be true at all. Nor is it that he is a person given to performing bad acts. That, too, may not be at all the case. Instead, it is that he regards someone else as having legitimate authority over nearly every aspect of his life.

To be sure, the servile slave does not see himself in the same positive light as the autonomous person sees herself; and Kantian moral theory enables us to express this point with some eloquence—as Thomas Hill has quite marvelously done.<sup>4</sup> Still, it is important to see that Kantian moral theory is not necessary to make sense of a slave, either as one who is servile or one who becomes autonomous. A servile slave could certainly become

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<sup>3</sup> Following, among others, Dworkin, *op. cit.*, and Graeme Marshall, "How Far Down Does the Will Go," in *The Analytic Freud* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> In "Servility and Self-Respect," in his *Autonomy and Self-Respect*.

autonomous, as we use that word, without coming to view himself as having moral worth in the Kantian sense of the term. It would simply suffice that this person comes to see himself as having legitimate authority over various aspects of his life; and this he could do without thinking that others should so view themselves or without embracing a defensible set of moral principles. A Kantian could always insist that we do not actually have autonomy in this latter instance. However, I do not think that anyone would be convinced by it.

As for Socrates and King, what most impresses us is their willingness to stand up for their beliefs even when this had put them very much at odds with society-at-large and, therefore, even when this involved putting their lives at risk. Socrates' beliefs about equality most certainly cannot be subsumed under Kantian moral theory. Certainly, he did not believe in anything like the idea of universal equality. Were his moral beliefs ahead of his time? I suppose so. But what exactly is the significance of this assertion? What most certainly does not follow is that one's moral beliefs are as they should be. King, of course, is celebrated for his remarkable struggle for racial equality and harmony. Though his character was perhaps unimpeachable in this regard, he had serious shortcomings in other areas of his life. He was a philanderer. Given the significance of what he did for bringing about racial equality, we may be inclined to overlook his philandering behavior. Perhaps we should. But if he is one of our paradigm models of the autonomous person, then we have been left more than a little shortchanged on the moral front. For as a moral good, the idea is not that the autonomous person is morally outstanding in one aspect of his life, but then open to much, much moral criticism in other aspects of his life.

According to Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development,<sup>5</sup> Socrates and King both qualify as Stage 6 persons who on account of being so are autonomous, where for Kohlberg Stage 6 is the highest stage of moral development. Kohlberg offers two central criteria for Stage 6 persons. One is that universality is a foundational part of their moral reasoning; the other is that they are willing to die for principles of the right. To be sure, Kohlberg realized all too well that Socrates and King did not subscribe to the same moral principles. But Kohlberg averred that each pushed the principles of the right, and so challenged the moral convictions of his fellow citizens, as far anyone could within the framework of the society in which he lived. Most importantly, on Kohlberg's view, they were willing to die for their beliefs, which I suppose evinces their utter sincerity. This assessment certainly seems right, and it accords without our view that the autonomous person is one who questions either authority or, more generally, the prevailing wisdom of society, even if this puts him at risk. And let us concede for the sake of argument that both Socrates and King subscribed to a universal conception of right and wrong. Notice, though, that it does not automatically follow from these considerations that an evil person cannot be autonomous. Nor, therefore, does it follow that it is always good to be autonomous.

Observe that a religious zealot can be quite universal in her moral views, wanting all the world to embrace a given religious point of view; and she may also quite openly question the prevailing societal mores, even to the point of putting her life at risk. Unfortunately, all

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<sup>5</sup> See his *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

of this is compatible with her being quite evil.<sup>6</sup> It will not do at all here to intone that the religious zealot wishes to impose her views upon others, quite unlike the autonomous person. For while we may not think of Socrates in this way, there is no denying that King meant to impose his view upon society at-large. He thought that the racial attitudes of the United States were in need of a radical overhauling; and his actions were calculated to bring about this end. Today, we look back and praise him for what he did. It goes without saying, however, that at the time his efforts met with great resistance from many quarters—some black; some white; some religious leaders. And King was adamant about breaking the back of that resistance.

As a response here, one could insist that anyone who believes that blacks are intellectually or morally inferior could not himself be truly autonomous; hence, those who resisted King's efforts for racial equality, whether white or black, were not themselves fully autonomous. Unfortunately, this approach will not get us very far. Thomas Jefferson is not generally presented as a paradigm example of an autonomous individual. Yet, he surely stands as one of the most autonomous and talented persons in American history. He also thought that blacks in general were inferior, even as helped to pen two of the most powerful documents of equality—*The Declaration of Independence* and *The Constitution of the United States*—ever written.

So if King and Jefferson are autonomous, then it follows that being autonomous is compatible with having deeply sexist and racist views, even if one has other views that are most admirable morally from a moral point of view. And if an autonomous person can have sexist or racist views, then surely nothing precludes an autonomous person from being evil. An autonomous person can be evil, where the idea is that the person would not do the evil that she does were it not for the fact that she is autonomous, in just the way that we think that King would not have done the good that he did were it not for the fact that he was autonomous. Furthermore, the idea that an evil person can be autonomous is in keeping with the root idea of autonomy, namely that it involves self-rule. Certainly it is absurd to think that self-rule is the privilege of the morally upright.

One might insist at this point that while the autonomous person may employ a multitude of methods to persuade people of her point of view, she always stops short of resorting to physical harm in order to do so. As a response here, let me just say that if there can be just wars, then this line of thought is simply false. There is no conceptual confusion at all involved in being autonomous and using force to bring about certain just ends under certain circumstances. Presumably, that is the lesson to be learnt from World War II or, at any rate, our romanticized version of it.

Now, I have also claimed that it is not always good to be autonomous. This may be evident in view of what has already been said. Let me make explicit, though, just how this line of thought goes.

Socrates is presented as the quintessential questioner, whose questioning is said to have warped the values of the youth. Be that as it may, Socrates did not destroy the basic framework of ancient Greek society. And even he seems to have acknowledged that there was much to be said on behalf his society, which is one of the reasons why he willingly

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<sup>6</sup> I am indebted here to Ehud Sprinzak, "Rational Fanatics," *Foreign Policy*, September/October (2000).

Fundamentalist Christians killing doctors who perform abortions would also be an example of evil being done in the name of an Almighty being.

accepted the punishment of death that was imposed upon him. The Socratic model makes questioning nearly a virtue in and of itself. Unfortunately, there is no reason to think that this is so. While questioning may do, and has done, considerable good, the truth of the matter is that questioning may also do considerable harm, contrary to what John Stuart Mill suggests in *On Liberty*. First of all, and we must not overlook this, it could very well turn out that an influential questioner of present mores is way off the mark. Or, a society may not be ready for certain questions if only because it may be radically under informed regarding the facts that bear upon the issues. Or, as we know, things that seem marvelous in theory often prove to be quite problematic in practice.

Socrates is presented to us as one who never, or nearly never, missed the mark in his questioning. This, though, is a claim about Socrates himself rather than an actual fact about the nature of questioning. Questioning can be quite injurious or, in any case, extremely unsettling even when quite legitimate questions are being raised. Blacks in the United States, for instance, have typically scored lower than whites on standardized test.<sup>7</sup> What is more, Asians who come to the United States, and thus for whom English is their second language, typically score higher than blacks. Nonetheless, raising questions regarding the implications of this for the intellectual wherewithal of blacks has hardly had a salubrious effect upon society. The issue is extremely, extremely explosive. It turns out, then, that uncritically accepting the prevailing view that intelligence is more or less evenly distributed across humanity regardless of ethnicity or race or gender turns out to be much more conducive to social harmony than the alternative. Unless one intends to affirm this point of view about the distribution of intelligence, actually exploring the facts regarding the test scores of blacks, whites, and Asians is most problematic precisely because doing generates so very much ill-will.

Which is better social harmony or autonomous questioning? Well, if there are times when autonomous questioning may do substantially more harm than good, then can it really be that questioning is always for the better no matter what? If owing to being autonomous a person was always moved to question and, as a result, she did more harm than good owing to the kinds of questions that she raises, then it might very well be a good thing if he were less autonomous. A brilliant 16-year old who motivates other less talented 16 year-olds to question their parents' authority could easily do more harm than good.

Let me hasten to add at this point that obviously it is possible to be autonomous without challenging the mores of society. What needs to be questioned sometimes are not the mores of society, but the judgments of an authority figure (a minister or a teacher or a spouse or parents). Moreover, one can clearly behave in this manner without calling attention to one's doing so. There may simply be no need for that. An adult child, for

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<sup>7</sup> See, obviously, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994). In his review of their book, Thomas J. Bouchard writes: "Virtually no one predicted this dramatic outcome for one of history's largest social experiments. Undoubtedly, Herrnstein and Murray's arguments are wrong in some of the details, and they may be wrong about the larger picture. Nevertheless, one of the goals of the intellectual enterprise is to question received wisdom, to ask difficult questions, and to seek novel and "better" solutions to both new and old problems. They have succeeded admirably at this task," *Contemporary Psychology* 40 (1995). See also Daniel P. Moynihan's report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), issued when he worked for the Department of Labor. Moynihan argues, it will be remembered, that the primary explanation for poverty among blacks is the breakdown of the black family. Moynihan was roundly criticized by civil rights leaders.

example, may come to realize that his parents are mistaken even as he understands that they are not likely to change. Yet, the general point that I was concerned to make in the immediately preceding discussion still holds, namely that there is no reason to think that a person is always better off in being autonomous or acting autonomously.<sup>8</sup>

Consider the following sentence uttered by Jamilla to her dear friend Rachel: “You are too pained at this moment to appreciate the truth of what I am saying. But please do not do such-and-such. It will only make matters worse for you and everyone else”. This is a perfectly coherent and quite meaningful statement. It is hard to imagine a deep and long-lasting friendship in which such a statement has not been uttered by one friend to the other. Arguably, the decision to follow such advice can itself be an autonomous one. What cannot be autonomous, though, is behaving in compliance with that advice; for in so behaving one is trusting the friend’s assessment of the situation instead of one’s own. It is one of the characteristic features of companion friendships that such friends sometimes forgo acting autonomously in the name of trusting their friend. To be sure, there can be excellent reasons for trusting a companion friend’s judgment regarding what is good for one. Still, nothing will change the fact that in so trusting such a friend, one relinquishes a little of one’s autonomy with regard to the matter at hand. All of this is very good thing on several accounts. Many hold with Aristotle that a life without friendship would be lacking in a fundamental way regardless of what else a person might have. If this is right, as well as the preceding observation regarding friendship and trust, then it cannot be a good thing that autonomy always has first place in our lives. Sometimes, so it would seem, the very best thing that we can do for ourselves, is to lay aside our autonomy and trust a friend.

In his magnificent work, *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls tells us that we must look to others to experience excellences that we ourselves cannot bring about. No one doubts the truth of what Rawls said, since we all understand that no one is capable of doing everything. It is also the case, though, that sometimes we must trust others in order to be successful in traveling along an unfamiliar path. When we are fortunate enough to have mentors, tutors, or friends who are willing to guide us along the way, then insisting upon being autonomous in such instances seems more like a vice rather than a virtue.

## II. SOCIETY AND ORDINARY CITIZENS

Most people are ordinary citizens of their society. In the great scheme of things, most will very little impact upon the society in which they live. Indeed, most are not concerned to change the world around them. Quite the contrary, most people want to *be* and *do* like those around them. In a word, most people simply want to fit in. To be sure, people typically sing the praises of autonomy. However, their actions belie their words. The appeal of ethnic identity nowadays is a most salient illustration of this. Claims about the virtue of ethnic pride can fell all sorts of very sound arguments. To the naked eye, it would appear that many members of ethnic groups are much more concerned that they are seen by other members of the same ethnic group as fitting in as opposed to having their own independently arrived at views about the world and their ethnic group in particular.

Every indication is that the desire to for a sense of belonging (or not to stand out as

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<sup>8</sup> Here I am deeply indebted to Philip Quinn’s discussion of autonomy in *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford University Press, 1978), ch. 1. He is critiquing James Rachels’ challenge that an autonomous person cannot comply to the commands of a divine being. See Rachels’ “God and Human Attitudes,” *Religious Studies* 7 (1971). I do not place the value upon autonomy that either he or Rachels does.

unacceptable to others) is of paramount importance for most people.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, it turns out for most people that this desire has far more strength than the desire to be autonomous; and this truth points to why the Kantian conception of autonomy is problematic. Arguably, people attach much more importance to long-lasting romantic ties than to autonomy itself or, for that matter, to freedom.

Kant's theory deeply embodies the idea that human beings have value; and acting autonomously is one of the ways in which human beings endorse their value.<sup>10</sup> The problem with Kant's position is that from the standpoint of human psychology he simply got it wrong. As we understand the idea of God, it is certainly the case that God can endorse his value in a fully resounding way. God does not need anyone else. Alas, human beings do not even come close to being like that. And there is the rub. What human needs in the final analysis they cannot give to themselves—namely ringing affirmation. Only others can give such affirmation to them. Kant got it wrong because he failed to attend sufficiently to the difference between *reasons as such* and reasons *qua* human beings,<sup>11</sup> where reasons as such are understood to have the purity, clarity, and force of reasons given by God who, among other things, is taken to be omniscient and omni benevolent. With God, not only are all the things that should be taken into account taken into account, but also every conceivable consideration is given precisely the weight that it should be given. Thus, the correctness of God's choices reverberates from the point of view of eternity.

Needless to say, nothing of the sort holds for human beings. They cannot give themselves the ringing endorsement that necessarily flows from the choices God makes. Instead, they must turn to one another for the endorsement they need. It is a constitutive feature of human beings that they need endorsement from others; for as we all know, providing such an endorsement is one of the fundamental things that parents do for their child in expressing their love for her or him. In either the need for affirmation or obtaining it, human beings never become God-like. Or so it is if, as I am assuming, God can give himself all the affirmation that He needs.

The importance of affirmation from others can be very simply illustrated. A person, say Josephus, can know all too well that he played a piano concerto flawlessly. Josephus need only to record his playing of the concerto and listen to his recording of it for mistakes, comparing his playing, for instances, with renditions of the concerto that are known to be flawless. This he can do several times in order to be sure. Upon discovering that there are no, flaw Josephus can be quite pleased with himself. Nonetheless, this self-acquired

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<sup>9</sup> For a philosophical discussion in this regard see, John M. Cooper, "Plato's Theory of Human Motivation," in Cooper's *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton University Press, 1999), in which he talks about the desire for esteem as a most important source of motivation. In *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), John Rawls holds that self-esteem is the first among primary good. And it is said to be a virtue of the principles of justice as fairness that they underwrite the self-esteem of the members of society considerably more than utilitarianism does. Yet, Rawls pushes a very hard Kantian interpretation of his theory. This, I believe, makes for considerable tension in Rawls's theory. However, this is not the place to develop this line of thought.

<sup>10</sup> I am much indebted here to Christine Korsgaard's *The Sources of Normativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and, in particular, the responses of G. A. Cohen, "Reason, Humanity, and the Moral Law" and Thomas Nagel "Universality and the Reflective Self", which follow her essay in the volume named above. My critical reading of Kant owes much to the discussion of him found in MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, chs. 4 and 5

<sup>11</sup> I owe this powerful distinction to Cohen's response to Korsgaard.

knowledge would not at all render otiose a compliment to that effect from a renown pianist (who just so happened to be in the adjacent studio). A compliment would be most welcome, although the compliment does not give Josephus any more information regarding his rendering of the concerto than he already has.

How can a compliment mean so much when it gives the person complimented no more information about his performance than he already has? The answer is that even when a person correctly recognizes the excellence of her performance, this still turns out to be an expression of her own will and judgment regarding her performance. By contrast, the recognition of excellence from another person is an expression of *that* person's will and judgment regarding the performance in question. Accordingly, although one has the same assessment in both cases, the compliment from the other is independent of one's judgment and will. Thus, the assessment has an independence that a person's own assessment of his work cannot have, however warranted that assessment may be. If human beings could ascend to the level of *reasons as such*, as Kant may have supposed that they could, then the issue of having an assessment independent of one's will would dissipate. There would be no difference in uptake between Josephus's own assessment of his piano playing and the assessment of a renowned pianist. But that level is beyond the reach of human beings. Or if not that, then human beings surely have no way of knowing when their reasoning is operating at level of reasons as such.

If I am correct in my account of Kant, then we have some insight into why a sense of belonging is a constitutive feature of human beings; for when a sense of belonging is in place, human beings receive on a number of fronts the affirmation they cannot provide for themselves. Hence, a society that promoted autonomy at the expense of a sense of community would in the end do more harm than good by leaving the members of society estranged from one another. By contrast, if a society promotes a deep sense of community, then it cannot make autonomy an equal priority; for where trust and deep emotional ties abound, there will be a diminution of autonomy in numerous instances.

As I remarked in the introduction, theorists typically note that neither American Slavery nor the Holocaust would have occurred had the citizens of these societies been more autonomous.<sup>12</sup> Although this is, to be sure, a chilling observation, I doubt if theorists can make of it the point they would like, which is that being autonomous is always a good thing and being non-autonomous is always a bad thing.

Here is why. It is arguable that had the English not followed the counsel of Winston Churchill perhaps as blindly, and so as non-autonomously, as the Germans are said to have followed Hitler, the English would not have survived World War II as well as they did. Or, to take a slightly different example, in their *Declaration of Repentance*,<sup>13</sup> the Bishops of France acknowledge that had they called upon greater resistance on the part of faithful Catholics in France, this would have significantly diminished the horrors visited upon French

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<sup>12</sup> See Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996). Goldhagen's thesis is that without ordinary people—as opposed soldiers and others in office—more or less willingly supporting the Holocaust, it could not have happened. In this regard, then, the Holocaust is similar to American Slavery. For being a slave owner was not a requirement of citizenship, nor was thinking that blacks are superior. In writing this section, I owe much to Richard Eldridge, *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-Understanding* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), especially the discussion, in ch. 3, of Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim.

<sup>13</sup> *Le Monde*, 30 September 1997.



Jews. Why? Because the faithful would simply have complied. Had events gone this way, it is out of the question that anyone would have argued that the faithful were open to moral criticism for having been non-autonomous in doing the morally right things that had been demanded of them.

As is well-known, the people of Le Chambon,<sup>14</sup> a close-knit community of deeply religious individuals, are responsible for having saved thousands of Jews from the Nazis. Reality being what it is, this is unlikely to have been a community consisting of mostly highly autonomous individuals; for close-knit communities exert enormous pressure to conform. Yet, in terms of the good they did, their absence of autonomy is most irrelevant. The people of Le Chambon were ordinary folks in perhaps the disparaging way in which Goldhagen intends that term in the subtitle of his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. What distinguished the typical citizen of Nazi Germany from the typical member of the Le Chambon community? There is no reason to think that autonomy is the answer. Rather, it is simply that the latter group of people subscribed to a different conception of the good.

History, far from revealing to us that autonomy is an ineliminable virtue for living well, suggest the following. The right conception of the good in the right hands can make all the difference in the world for the better. The wrong conception of the good in the wrong hands can make all the difference in the world for the worse. Alas, the difference in either case may have nothing whatsoever to do with whether the individuals in question are autonomous beings or not, since we may have no more autonomy in the one case than we have in the other case.

It is abundantly clear that extraordinarily autonomous individuals may facilitate extraordinary instances of moral goodness. Alas, it must also be acknowledged that extraordinarily autonomous individuals may facilitate extraordinary instances of evil.

Regarding American Slavery and the Holocaust, it can be conceded that had more people in these societies been autonomous, then these atrocities would not have occurred. But let us be clear as to why this so. The idea is supposed to be that had more people been autonomous, then they would have seen the wrong of the activities in question *because* they would have seen blacks and Jews respectively as moral equals. Further, the idea is supposed to be that a society is better off as such if most of its members are autonomous. Well, the truth of neither proposition follows from what it means to be autonomous unless, of course, one is committed to a Kantian conception of autonomy that is inextricably linked to the right, which has its own problems.

Had more Germans in Nazi Germany been autonomous, then there might not have been such widespread sentiment in favor of the Jews being killed, which presumably would have been an enormous impediment to such killings taking place. And had more whites during American Slavery been autonomous there might not have been such widespread sentiment in favor of blacks being slaves, which presumably would have been an enormous impediment to the prevalence of slavery. Needless to say, though, not being in favor of killing X or of turning X into a slave does not entail that one regards X as a moral equal.

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<sup>14</sup> See Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

After all, men in most cultures have not been in favor of either killing or enslaving women; yet, men have not regarded women as moral equals.

One can autonomously question an option that is wrong without embracing what is the morally right thing to do. Implicit in the wording of the preceding sentence is the unvarnished truth that one can autonomously object to a wrong for considerations other than that it is wrong; for the prevailing view may be mistaken not only with regard to the morality of a course of action but its benefits or its costs, say. Bearing these points in mind, it is hardly obvious why society would invariably be better off if everyone were autonomous. If everyone were autonomous, then presumably there would be lots of questioning going on. This would undoubtedly be an obstacle to certain wrongs from occurring. The other side of that coin, however, is that this would also be an obstacle to numerous goods coming to pass. The exercise of autonomy by either a KKK grand dragon or a Black Panther Party leader, jointly or individually, leaves society a little less harmonious racially. It was not so much autonomy that made the Civil Rights Movement possible as it was a profound hope and an abiding faith in Martin Luther King.

### III. THE MORAL ORDER

As I have said, for ordinary citizens fitting in is more important than being autonomous, because human beings have a deep, deep need to belong.<sup>15</sup> The tendency among philosophy to treat autonomy as the first good in the life of human beings rests upon a mistaken conception of the self. Human being could not attain adulthood as psychologically wholesome human beings in the absence of sustained affirmation by their parents. Nothing would be more stunning than that it turned out in adulthood that the need for affirmation was of little importance. Quite the contrary, human beings have been relentless in pursuing ways to affirm themselves in a public manner, from joining a gang to entering in a contest for discovering that next greatest talent regarding such-and-such, from buying the latest new style to spending thousands upon plastic surgery. I hold, though I cannot defend the claim here, that there is a direct correlation between a transient and anonymous society and the extent to which people pursue fads in order to obtain public affirmation in order to have a sense of belonging.

Now, a defining feature of deontological moral theory is that the right is prior to the good. For the Kantian, it is the only the right which that allows each person to affirm his value as an autonomous creature while simultaneously affirming the value of all others as autonomous creatures. I hold, instead, that is only the right that allows all members of society to have a sense of belong at once. For a society's commitment to the right acknowledges that all of its members have value within its borders. The society affirms its members.

In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau writes:

The family is the first model of political societies. The head of society corresponds to the position of the father; whereas the people, themselves, correspond to the image of the children. What is more, all are born equal. . . . The only difference is that with the family, the love of the father for his children is what, as it were, rewards him for that which he does on their behalf . . . .(Bk I, Ch. ii).

I believe that what Rousseau saw as clearly as anyone is that we are deeply motivated to

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<sup>15</sup> I have benefited enormously from Michael Stocker (with Elizabeth Hegeman) *Valuing Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). He holds that our emotions deeply reveal what we value.

conform to the precepts of those institutions that affirm us. If those precepts are evil, then most of us are likely to fall in line nonetheless and we will do evil in the name of the institutions in question. If those precepts are righteous, then most of us are likely to fall in line and, lo, we will do that which is good. If this is correct, then what we most need is a moral order that affirms us while at the same time underwriting that affirmation with a conception of the right. This should come as no surprise. For in addition to affirmation what most of us want in the end is not that our fellow citizens be autonomous but that they do right by us, and likewise for what they want from us. If along the way everyone turns out to be autonomous that is nice. But that is not first among the things that we value in our fellow citizens. Accordingly, the correct moral order cannot be one that prizes autonomy above all else. It cannot be one that holds that this is what the reasonable person would want above all else (assuming that food and shelter are met). For such a moral order would fly in the face of the reality that human beings are quintessential social creatures.

To put things another way: the right cannot be defined independently of a conception of human flourishing and psychological needs.<sup>16</sup> And this is at the heart of what goes wrong with Kantian theory as it insists that the right holds for all rational creatures. The moral order must anchor its conception of the right in the psychological reality of human beings; and this places the good of a sense of belonging prior to the good of autonomy.

#### IV. Conclusion: Autonomy, Moral Behavior and Appreciation

We enormously appreciate those who refrain from harming us. Does our appreciation require or presuppose that in refraining they did so as fully autonomous beings? The answer, of course, depends on what it means not to be fully autonomous. To be sure, it is better to be alive than dead; hence, it is better that a robot, sensing our body heat, should mindlessly grab us out of harm's way than that we should die. But does not being fully autonomous mean that one mindlessly does what one does?<sup>17</sup> Surely not, since it is not the case that either one is fully autonomous or not autonomous at all. There is no reason to think that a person cannot sufficiently grasp and appreciate the significance of her or his actions unless the individual is fully autonomous, and thus unless the individual is acting on principles that are entirely self-chosen (under some suitable description or the other). Nor again does it seem necessary that a person's actions satisfy a reiterated set of wants as suggested by Harry Frankfurt's views.<sup>18</sup> Human beings often have more than sufficient grasp and appreciation of what they are doing without fully comprehending why they were moved so to behave or without there being an alignment of wants through multiple levels. So this is to say that if autonomy requires self-directedness understood in the way just indicated, then full autonomy is not necessary for persons to have the requisite appreciate of their behavior.

In order to appreciate the good that people do for us what is needed is not that they be fully autonomous but simply that they, themselves, have a sufficient grasp and appreciation

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<sup>16</sup> Here I follow John M. Cooper, *Reason and Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 83-87.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) comes dangerously close to suggesting this view.

<sup>18</sup> In "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971).

of their actions. What this involves is a matter that cannot be addressed here. But we know that its realization does not require full autonomy on the part of individuals.

On the other hand, if we take seriously the distinction between being autonomous and being fully autonomous, then this paper is perhaps far less radical than it might initially appear to be. For I have not argued that autonomy as such is a bad thing, but only that it should not be seen as first among things that human beings either want or need. Being fully autonomous is a philosophical idea that is of no relevance to the quotidian activities of the typical person—romantic ties, children, work, bills, and so forth. Kantians argue that we miss the moral mark and, moreover, we cannot be our true selves because we cannot properly value ourselves unless we strive to become, and in fact become, fully autonomous. And it seems that many embrace the importance of being fully autonomous even if they reject Kant's framework.

I have challenged in Section II the idea that persons, not being God-like, can value themselves in the resounding way that Kantian theory requires. As to the non-Kantians who make being fully autonomous a virtue: I have given reason to think that we could very well have all the autonomy that we need without being fully autonomous. For it will be remembered that the morally good behavior of the people of Le Chambon does not presuppose that they acted fully autonomously in so behaving. The proper moral order, then, would be one that recognized the importance of autonomy without presupposing that society's aim should be that all of its members are fully autonomous and, therefore, are lacking on account of not being so. This, while perhaps having little to do with rational creatures as such, has everything to do with human beings as such. Theories of autonomy get in the way of who we are as human beings if they entail that we need autonomy more than we need one another. This essay acknowledges the good of autonomy without making that mistake. By abandoning the idea that it is always better to have more autonomy than less, we are able to see more clearly what is central to flourishing among human beings as quintessential social creatures.