

## Autonomy, Behavior & Moral Goodness

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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 and 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. For Kantians, this directly links autonomy to morality, which for Kantians is an ineliminable aspect of reason. Of course, autonomy is widely heralded as a good by those who do not accept Kant's philosophical moorings. Autonomy, like liberty, seems to be regarded as a good whatever the philosophical leanings of people might be. Hence, it is

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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. The idea of autonomy is, of course, an invention of Immanuel Kant. On this, see J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 22. In writing this essay, I 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.

all ways understood as a good thing to be autonomous or to have autonomy or to act autonomously, hence, a bad thing not be autonomous. Likewise, undermining a person's autonomy is always deemed a wrong. Accordingly, autonomy is often invoked favorably, even in passing, as a way of underscoring a point or fixing intuitions.

On the practical side, the good of autonomy is typically defended by pointing out that such atrocities as American Slavery or the Holocaust would not have occurred had far more of the members of these respective societies been autonomous and questioned authority or their mores of their societies (a matter which I shall discuss in Section II).

We might pause here to distinguish between different forms of autonomy, say moral versus personal autonomy.<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say that what I am interested in might be properly called moral autonomy. Just so, I am going to refrain from this way of speaking. This is because part of my argument is that evil people can be autonomous; and claiming that an evil person is morally autonomous results in a kind of verbal cacophony that I wish to avoid.

Notwithstanding the fact that the idea of autonomy is invariably invoked with approval, it is arguable that

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Waldron in "Moral Autonomy and Personal Autonomy" has questioned the connections between these two forms of autonomy. This paper is available on line at:

<http://philosophy.la.psu.edu/jchristman/autonomy/Waldron.PDF>

autonomy is less understood than related notions like liberty or freedom. So it is not so clear just what it is that is such an extraordinary good. Kantians, as I have intimated above, link autonomy to reasons, and then to principles. But non-Kantians do not take quite this route. Indeed, a cursive glance at the literature makes it clear that autonomy is prized in its own right rather than owing to some link with moral principles. This is supported by the observation that we often judge that a person is morally autonomous without supposing for a moment that we know the moral principles to which the person subscribes. In a specific instance, to assert that women should be more autonomous is not thereby to maintain that they should be more embracing of this or that set of moral principles. In fact, it is not clear that this assertion pertains to acting morally at all, though the moral wrong of sexism constitutes the backdrop against which this assertion is made. Or in observing that slaves lacked moral autonomy, one is certainly not pointing out that their behavior was morally despicable. For that was often not the case at all.<sup>3</sup>

The view that I shall defend in this essay, then, 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

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<sup>3</sup> I am following the line of thought developed in my essay "Self-Respect, Fairness, and Living Morally," in Tommy Lott and John L. Pittman (eds.), *A Companion to African-American Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

acts morally but with no more autonomy than what I shall call rudimentary autonomy: One believes that (a) one is capable of distinguishing right from wrong, that (b) one has the right to choose how to live one's own life, and that (c) one has the wherewithal to act as one. Moreover, one's behavior reflects this three-prong belief. One does not have an account, let alone a theory or a set of principles, by which one deems actions to be right or wrong. One's belief and disposition so to behave simply reflects one's upbringing. Rudimentary autonomy is about as much autonomy as most people in Western cultures seem to have or even want. Most people cannot defend their moral beliefs beyond reference to their deep visceral feelings; and these feelings typically reflect their prevailing moral attitudes of the social community with which the individual identifies. For our purposes, though, what is of enormous importance is that moral praise and blame does not require anything more than rudimentary autonomy. Perhaps moral philosophers and psychologists can give a profound explanation for why either child sexual abuse or genocide is morally wrong. Most people cannot, however, though they know and are expected to know that such behavior is morally wrong. And from the standpoint of moral condemnation for such acts, this is all the knowledge that is expected of such persons. Only as a joke would anyone think that a person who engaged in such behavior could not be penalized because the individual did not have a substantial explanation, let alone a

philosophical one, for why such behavior is morally wrong. As I have said some autonomy is necessary for moral agency. Hence, some moral autonomy is necessarily a good thing insofar as moral agency is to be valued.

Clearly, rudimentary autonomy is neutral between good and evil, in that some people who possess it do acts that are praiseworthy whereas others do acts that blameworthy. According to some rudimentary autonomy is a misnomer, since it is not autonomy at all. My thought here is this. Autonomy is not an all-or-nothing matter. And it is implausible to think that the very nature of autonomy is such that once one crosses the threshold from being non-autonomous to being autonomous one thereby exhibits a most extraordinary set of character traits.

Rudimentary autonomy is to be contrasted with what I shall call principled-autonomy, of which a Kantian conception of autonomy stands as a paradigm example. Principled-autonomy, I should point out, is not necessary for moral agency, as I hope to illustrate later in the essay. At any rate, this is the autonomy that philosophers seem to have in mind when claiming that autonomy is a good thing—as opposed to the level of autonomy that no more than suffices to get praise and blame off the ground. It is principled autonomy that has been set upon a pedestal. I shall argue that it does not deserve such high regard. This is because principled autonomy is also neutral between good and evil. A person is neither a morally better nor worse person

merely on account of being more rather than less autonomous. It goes without saying that the most sophisticated defense of autonomy is Kant's. In Section II, I try to show, without becoming enmeshed in Kantian exegesis, why autonomy as Kant conceived of it cannot work.

#### I. AUTONOMY: LESSONS FROM LIFE

The root idea of principled-autonomy is self-rule with respect to moral precepts, where presumably the importance to self-rule is attached to the fact that one accords the appropriate value to oneself.<sup>4</sup> Autonomous persons, then, are those who pursue their conception of the moral good, where this represents what they want to do rather than what others (such as parents) want them to do. Accordingly, autonomous persons believe that no one can legitimately require them to pursue this or that conception of the moral good. Autonomous persons are the authors of their conception of the moral good. It is to be understood here that just as the expression 'moral behavior' refers to behavior that can be morally acceptable or unacceptable, the expression 'moral good' picks out a set of moral precepts that can be morally acceptable or morally unacceptable.

The propriety of the expression "principled-autonomy" lies in the idea that people with principled-autonomy can proffer reasons for the conception of the

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<sup>4</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).

moral good that they pursue. They are not just being carried along by the winds of desire.<sup>5</sup> 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 different paradigm examples in turn.

Regarding the servile slave,<sup>6</sup> let us begin by distinguishing between (a) believing that it is appropriate for others to rule one's life entirely and (b) having one's own conception of the good. Obviously, any adult who believes that it is appropriate for others to rule entirely her or his life is servile; and it is, of course, true that the servile slave does not have his own conception of the good. The problem lies in thinking that the absence of (b) entails (a). Not so. From the fact that a person does not have a principled conception of the good regarding how to live his life, in no way does it follow that he thinks that anyone is entitled to rule his life entirely. Though (a) and (b) cannot both be true of a person at the same time; it can turn out that not-(a) and not-(b) can both be true of a

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<sup>5</sup> I am inspired here by Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, rpt. (Princeton University Press, 1977)

<sup>6</sup> Although American slavery may readily come to mind here, Islamic slavery of the Middle Ages provides us with extraordinary examples of the malleability of human beings with respect to being servile. See, Shaun E. Marmon (ed.), *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1999).

person at the same time. If this is right, then we do not need principled-autonomy to make sense of either servility or its absence. During the era of American slavery, the typical servile slave held that certain others were entitled to rule his life. All the same, it is manifestly false that non-slaves during this era typically had a principled conception of the moral good that animated their lives.

Undeniably, Kantian moral theory gives us a particularly eloquent way of talking about servility and autonomy, as Thomas Hill quite marvelously illustrates in his essay "Servility and Self-Respect".<sup>7</sup> But what is at issue is whether or not Kantian moral theory is necessary to make sense of servility or its absence. The answer is that it is not, as we have just seen.

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, put their lives at risk. Socrates' beliefs about equality most certainly cannot be subsumed under Kantian moral theory. Were his moral beliefs right for his time? I suppose so. But what exactly is the significance of this assertion? 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 known for his marital infidelity. Given the significance of what

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<sup>7</sup> Reprinted in his *Autonomy and Self-Respect*.

he did for bringing about racial equality, we may be inclined to overlook his infidelity. 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 King was a moral exemplar in one area of life, but a moral misfit in another. And if this is all that principled-autonomy comes to, then it hardly seems to be the spectacular good of which so much is made. That is, the valorization of autonomy does not invite the thought that a person might be a moral giant in some areas of life, but be morally unconscionable in other areas of his life. Its valorization gives the impression of impeachable moral excellence *tout court*.

According to Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development,<sup>8</sup> Socrates and King both qualify as Stage 6 persons who on account of being so autonomous are at that stage, where Stage 6 is deemed 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

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<sup>8</sup> See his *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981). I am interested not so much in the soundness of Kohlberg's theory as I am in the fact that he took Socrates and King as exemplars of the highest stage of moral development. This gave his theory a very intuitive appeal.

pushed the principles of the right, and so challenged the moral convictions of his fellow citizens, as far he 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 of Socrates and King 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.

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 of this is compatible with her being quite evil.<sup>9</sup> In fact, there is nothing that precludes evil people from living by deep, deep principles for which they are willing to put their lives on the line. Hitler's commitment to an Aryan race was not a passing belief on his part, as a cursory reading of *Mein Kampf* reveals. There can be no question but that he held a conception of the moral good that he himself forged, albeit it was a morally fulsome one. Likewise for Stalin.

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<sup>9</sup> I am indebted here to Ehud Sprinzak, "Rational Fanatics," *Foreign Policy*, September/October (2000)

Likewise for members of the present day Aryan Nation. Alas, the truth of the matter is that some of the Aryan Nation variety claim to be espousing fundamental Christian precepts.<sup>10</sup> So surely we have a conception of the moral good here.

Kohlberg tried to show that autonomy was such that if a person turned out to be autonomous, then she or he turned out to be moral in that she pushed the principles of the right as far as one could imagine given the conceptual constraints of the society in which a person belonged. Unfortunately, it is only a Pyrrhic victory to define autonomy to mean that a person embraces only principles of the right. For one thing, this still leaves us with the problem of marital infidelity on the part of the autonomous Mr. King's and, as we shall see below, the problem of racism on the part of the autonomous Mr. Thomas Jefferson. This in turn leaves us with the reality that people highly touted to be autonomous only push some principles of the right whilst wallowing in the cesspool of immorality in other areas of their life. Yet another example in this regard would be the great Protest reformist, Martin Luther who was also a rabid antisemite who penned the notorious essay "On the Jews and their Lies" (1543). That said, he held a most significant conception of the moral good with regard to religious worship. Luther was as

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<sup>10</sup> See Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994)

autonomous in his hatred of Jews as he was in his insistence upon certain rituals of worship.

It will not do to intone that the autonomous person does not seek to impose her or his views upon others unlike the wicked people whom I have just named. For while we may not think of Socrates as seeking to impose his view, 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 a radical overhauling; and his actions, such the economic boycott in Montgomery, 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 who resisted were black, some were white, and some were religious leaders from both sides of the racial divide. What is more, 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. Besides, one can do a lot of harm to a person's life without laying a hand upon the individual. Montgomery boycott is a case in point.

As a general response here, one could insist that any one 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 he 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 Luther, Jefferson, and King are autonomous, then being autonomous is compatible with having deeply sexist and racist views, even if one has other views that are most admirable morally speaking. And if an autonomous person can have racist or sexist, then surely nothing precludes an autonomous person from being evil morally generally—such as a Hitler, or a Stalin, or a Nero. An autonomous person can be evil, where the idea is that the person would not do the evil that she does but for the fact that she is autonomous, in just the way that we think that Socrates and King would not have done the good that they did but for the fact that they were autonomous. Furthermore, the idea that an evil person can be autonomous is in keeping with the root idea of autonomy that it involves self-rule; for surely self-rule is not a privilege of the morally upright.

One of the great virtues of autonomy is thought to lie in the fact the autonomous person questions. 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 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>11</sup> What is more, Asians

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<sup>11</sup> See, obviously, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*

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. So just believing the prevailing mores that intelligence is more or less evenly distributed across humanity regardless of ethnicity or race or gender just seems 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 more harm than good, then it

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(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.

follows that the answer cannot be that autonomous questioning is always for the better no matter what? So if a person is such that in virtue of being autonomous he could not refrain from questioning would result in his doing more harm than good, then is not obvious just how his autonomy turns out to be a good thing, either for him or anyone else. To be sure, autonomy is certainly not a form of coercion. What I am imagining here, however, is that the autonomous person feels that she or he should act in order to bring about the desired change or to express disapprobation. It may be unfortunate that the autonomous person troubles the social waters. It is likely that doing so may make all sorts of people uncomfortable. All the same, this alone cannot always be a sufficient reason for the autonomous person not to act. Finally, if one allows that evil people can be autonomous, then the exercise of autonomy by such folks invariably results in a less harmonious society. The exercise of autonomy by KKK folks and folks in the Black Panther Party has done nothing whatsoever to produce racial harmony in the United States.

Let me hasten to make the obvious point that 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 clergy member or a teacher or a spouse or parents). Moreover, one can clearly question something without calling attention to one's doing so. There may simply be no need for that.

An adult child, for 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 am concerned to make in the immediately preceding discussion still stands, namely that there is no reason to think that being or acting autonomously is always a good thing.<sup>12</sup> There are many reasons why this so. Not the least of these, though, may be that the person lacks the relevant experience that would give her or him insight into both the matter at hand and the way in which she or he will be affected by it. A person may have very good reasons to trust another's assessment of matters and how it would impact upon him, though he cannot himself see the validity of the assessment. This is typically the case with a child vis à vis her or his parents, which is why it is reasonable to expect a child to trust her or his parents to such an extent. Although the typical adult certainly has more experience than the typical child, being an adult hardly gives one competence in all areas of life. Often we must defer to others in order to get by in life, especially when there pressing concerns and we do not have either the time or the will to become sufficiently informed about the matter at hand. I shall offer a poignant example of this

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<sup>12</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.

in the following section. At the moment, let me observe that friendships provide a particularly interesting context for this setting aside principled-autonomy upon occasion.

Consider the following sentence uttered by Jamilla to her dear friend Rachel, both of whom are adults: "You are too pained at this moment to appreciate the truth of what I am saying. But please do not do such-n-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.

## II. SOCIETY AND ORDINARY CITIZENS

Most people are ordinary citizens of their society. They are certainly not philosophers who make a career out of reflection. Instead, 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. While there are perhaps various explanations for this disparity here, I want to draw attention to the desire to have a sense of belonging (or not to stand out as unacceptable to others).<sup>13</sup> In general, this desire has far more strength than the desire to be autonomous; and points to why the Kantian conception of autonomy is problematic.

Kant's theory deeply embodies the idea that

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<sup>13</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.

human beings have value; and acting autonomously is one of the ways in which human beings endorse their value through and through.<sup>14</sup> It, obviously, be absolutely extraordinary of by an act of will human beings could affirm their value through and through. This would give human beings complete independence from one another. The problem with Kant's position is that from the standpoint of human psychology he simply got it wrong. Unquestionably God can endorse his value in such a resounding way, but human beings cannot. And there is the rub. What humans need 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>15</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 omnibenevolent. 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

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<sup>14</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>15</sup> I owe this powerful distinction to Cohen's response to Korsgaard.

the weight that it should be given. Unequivocally, God is the Ideal Observer.

Operating with *reasons as such*, it may very well be that individuals can endorse their value in a ringing manner, as I am supposing that God can do. However, it is not clear what it means for human beings to operate with reasons as such; for human beings will invariably fall short the mark; and without the wherewithal to do so, they cannot give themselves the ringing endorsement that God can give himself. 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 which makes him independent of all things external to him.<sup>16</sup>

The importance of affirmation from others can be simply illustrated. A person, say Josephus, can know all too well that he played a piano concerto flawlessly. Josephus need only to record it and listen to his recording of it for mistakes. If necessary, he could compare his recording of his own playing of the concerto with a performance known to be flawless.

Discovering that there are no flaws, he can be quite pleased with himself. Just so, this self-acquired 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), and would in fact be most welcomed, 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 recognition 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

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<sup>16</sup> For this wording, I am indebted to Schneewind, op. cit., p. 493.

of human beings. Not so with God, who has no need to be reminded of His perfections by human beings or creatures of any other kind.

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 principled-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. On the other hand, if a society promotes a deep sense of community, then it cannot make principled-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>17</sup> Although

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<sup>17</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*,

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 British would not have survived World War II as well as they did. The British had been devastated; and it was Churchill who, in giving the people the will to survive, made it possible the nation to get through that dark time. Though one of history's remarkable moments, this is not owing to the majesty of principled-autonomy exemplified in the lives of the ordinary citizens. Quite the contrary, it is owing to people having put their blind trust in a leader. There is no reason to think that things would have been better had most folks exhibited principled-autonomy. This point calls to mind the earlier observation that as adults we are not always in the position to exhibit principled-autonomously. They exhibited rudimentary autonomy, and on all accounts were none the worse for it.

To take a slightly different example: in their *Declaration of Repentance*,<sup>18</sup> the Bishops of France acknowledge that had they called upon greater

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and *Self-Understanding* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), especially the discussion, in ch. 3, of Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim.

<sup>18</sup> *Le Monde*, 30 September 1997.

resistance on the part of faithful Catholics in France, this would have significantly diminished the horrors visited upon French Jews. Why? Because the faithful would simply have complied. Had events gone this way, surely no one would dare argue that the faithful were open to moral criticism on account of having unthinkingly, and so non-autonomously, done the morally right things that had been demanded of them. Rather, they would have been thought ever so praiseworthy; and history provides us with a wonderful illustration of this. Here, too, what would have is rudimentary autonomy.

As is well-known, the people of Le Chambon,<sup>19</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 principled-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

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<sup>19</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).

Chambon community? There is no reason to think that principled-autonomy is the answer. The answer, instead, is simply that the latter subscribed to a fundamentally different moral point of view.

The absence of principled-autonomy notwithstanding: The right conception of the moral good in the right hands can make all the difference in the world for the better. The wrong conception of the moral 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 principally-autonomous beings or not, since we may have no more autonomy in the one case than we do in the other case. In terms of principled-autonomy, 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.

### 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>20</sup> The tendency among philosophy to treat autonomy as

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<sup>20</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.

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 in adulthood the need for affirmation took on little or no 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 regard such-n-such, from buying the latest new style to modifying their appearances at nearly all costs. 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 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 did that we are deeply motivated to 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 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, 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>21</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 AND GOODNESS.

It was Kant himself who famously observed in the *Groundwork* that nothing is good without qualification except a good will. This is one of the few substantive statements in the history of philosophy that seems utterly beyond dispute. Those engaged in Kantian exegesis have masterfully drawn attention to the significance of this truth, noting that even so noble a sentiment as love itself can result in inappropriate behavior. Alas, principled-autonomy seems to have acquired the same status with respect to goodness as a good will. For Kant, this is perhaps understandable given his theoretical underpinnings of the notion. In fact, he would reject the very distinction between rudimentary and principled autonomy that I have drawn, as there can only be principled-autonomy for him. However, I have tried to show that Kant made a mistake here in thinking that autonomous human

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<sup>21</sup> Here I follow John M. Cooper, *Reason and Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 83-87.

beings could affirm themselves through and through. Perhaps even an understandable mistake.

On the other hand, many who de-couple autonomy from its Kantian theoretical machinery nonetheless place principled-autonomy on a pedestal. I have argued that principled-autonomy does not belong on a pedestal. This is because there is no argument to show that principled-autonomy is the purview of only the morally upright. The idea of an evil person having principled-autonomy is not at all conceptually incoherent. This must be allowed given the deep, deep moral character flaws of people like Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King, who are admired and celebrated for being individuals of principled-autonomy.

Undoubtedly, part of the inescapable appeal of autonomy is that it is invariably associated with a way of valuing the self, with the servile slave standing as a paradigm example of someone who fails to value her- or himself properly. Whatever else is true, being servile is not a morally good thing. The mistake, if I have argued correctly, lies in thinking that we have a non-servile person only if we have a person who exhibits principled-autonomy. To be sure, wherever we have principled-autonomy, we have the absence of servility. It is just that the converse is false. Autonomy is surely not an all-or-nothing matter. And it just plain silly to suppose that either a person is servile or she or he exhibits principled-autonomy; hence, the propriety of the expression rudimentary autonomy. And it seems equally silly, if not sillier, to suppose that if a person is

not servile, then she or he is a morally decent person.

Alas, when Kant intoned that there is nothing whatsoever good without qualification except a good will, he uttered a truth that is more radical than is typically supposed, even by his staunchest defenders. Or so it is if, as I have argued, not even autonomy is the exception to this extraordinarily fecund claim by Kant.

This accords well with what we already, namely that with rare exception, principled-autonomy is not first among what people want. Rather, it is to belong and be accepted by various others. This, in turn, underwrites the truth that it is the proper moral training, and not principled-autonomy as such, that is pivotal to persons living morally decent lives and doing what is right in trying times. The people of Le Chambon were a close-knit Christian community. Without great argument or philosophical thought, they took it upon themselves to do the right thing. With finesse, they exhibited rudimentary autonomy. Principled-autonomy on the part of the citizens of Le Chambon would not have made that moment any better morally speaking.