THE CONCEPT OF AUTONOMY

Gerald DWORKIN
University of Illinois, Chicago Circle

In both theoretical and applied contexts the notion of autonomy has assumed increasing importance in recent philosophical discussion. Philosophers such as Rawls, Wolff and Scanlon have used the concept to illuminate problems including the characterization of principles of justice, the limits on free speech, and the nature of legitimate authority. In the biomedical context the notion is used in discussions of the legitimacy of various forms of behavior control, and in clarifying the rationale behind the doctrine of informed consent. In contemporary discussion concerning the nature of education, and the possibility of moral education as part of the curriculum, notions of autonomy and self-direction are invoked. In the psychological literature we find claims by Skinner and others that an adequate explanatory scheme for understanding human behavior can and should dispense with ideas of autonomy. It is clear that the notion of autonomy deserves the same kind of careful and comprehensive philosophical examination that concepts such as liberty and equality have received.

It is also apparent that the term is used in very different ways by different authors. It is not at all clear that they are all referring to the same concept, nor that they should be given that they are dealing with very different issues.

It is apparent that while not used just as a synonym for qualities that are usually approved of, the term is used in an exceedingly broad fashion. It is used sometimes as an equivalent of liberty (positive or negative in Berlin's terminology), sometimes as equivalent to self-rule or sovereignty, sometimes as identical with freedom of the will. It is equated with dignity, integrity, individuality, independence, responsibility, and self-knowledge. It is identified with qualities of self-assertion, with critical reflection, with freedom from obligation, with absence of external causation, with knowledge of one's own in-
terests. It is related to actions, to beliefs, to reasons for acting, to rules, to the will of other persons, to thoughts and to principles. About the only features held constant from one author to another are that autonomy is a feature of persons and that it is a desirable quality to have.

Given various problems which it is believed may be clarified or resolved with the aid of a concept of autonomy, how may we most usefully characterize the concept? I use the vague term "characterize" rather than "define" or "analyze" because I do not think it possible with any moderately complex philosophical concept to specify necessary and sufficient conditions without draining the concept of the very complexity which enables it to perform its theoretical role. Autonomy is a term of art introduced by a theorist in an attempt to make sense of a tangled net of intuitions, conceptual and empirical issues, and normative claims. What one needs, therefore, is a study of how the term is connected with other notions, what role it plays in justifying various normative claims, how the notion is supposed to ground ascriptions of value, and so on — in short a theory.

A theory, however, requires conditions of adequacy; constraints we impose antecedently on any satisfactory development of the concept. In the absence of some theoretical, empirical or normative limits we have no way of arguing for or against any proposed explication. To say this is not to deny the possibility we may end up some distance from our starting point. The difficulties we encounter may best be resolved by adding or dropping items from the initial set of constraints. But without some limits to run up against we are too free to make progress.

I propose the following criteria for a satisfactory theory of autonomy.

A. Logical consistency

The concept should be neither internally inconsistent nor inconsistent (logically) with other concepts we know to be consistent. So, for example, if the idea of an uncaused cause were inconsistent and autonomy required the existence of such a cause it would fail to satisfy this criterion.

B. Empirical possibility

There should be no empirically grounded or theoretically derived knowledge which makes it impossible or extremely unlikely that anybody ever has been, or could be, autonomous. Thus, a theory which