

AUTONOMY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF VALUES

David Copp

University of Florida

dcopp@phil.ufl.edu

ABSTRACT: An agent is autonomous only if she governs her life in accord with her values. If our values had not been shaped by our society's culture, and by the values of our family and friends, we might not have had any values at all. Hence, living in a society seems to be a precondition of autonomous agency. This is ironic, for a person's values can be so influenced by the culture of her society that it can seem doubtful that a life governed by them could qualify as *self*-governed, no matter what else might be the case. The solution to this little puzzle is to recognize that the socialization of a child creates an agent capable of autonomy. A child does not autonomously choose her values, but this does not undermine her autonomy. An adult who does not exercise control over changes in her values, however, might be less than fully autonomous.

PRESENTATION: This paper is a gift for Wlodek Rabinowicz, one of the world's most charming and delightful philosophers, in celebration of his sixtieth birthday.

An autonomous agent is 'self-governing'. There are of course different ways to understand what this might mean. I have argued elsewhere that an agent is self-governed only if she governs her life in accord with her values. Of course I do not think that autonomy is simply a matter of living in accord with one's values; there is more to be said, as I will explain. Yet the central requirement is that the autonomous person governs her life by her values. A person's values are aspects of her 'identity' in a way that most of her ends are not, and, because of this, if we assume that certain additional conditions are met, it is plausible to view action governed by a person's values as governed by her *self*.¹

The trouble is that our values are not autonomously chosen except in unusual cases. We are influenced by the culture of our society and by the values of our family and of other groups, and our values reflect these influences. The nature of these influences can seem to undermine our autonomy by constraining the kinds of values we are able to adopt. No matter what additional conditions are met, it might seem implausible that we could qualify as *self*-governing in virtue of governing our lives in accord with values we have only because of influences of these kinds. No matter what else might be true of a person, it may seem, if her values have been shaped by the local culture and by the values of her family and friends in a way that is outside of her control, she cannot be self-governing even if she governs her life in accord with her values. In the case of such a person, it may seem, no matter what additional conditions she may meet, there is no way to paper over the fact that her values are not her own, except in the trivial sense that she is the person who has them.

¹ Copp, 2005.

Ironically, it seems unlikely that we could be autonomous if our values had not been shaped by our society's culture and by the values of our family and friends. A society makes available to us a menu of possibilities, both possible ways of life and things we could value. Outside of a society, in a hypothetical 'state of nature', assuming of course that we could manage to live at all, we would be driven by our needs into a way of life. Our lives would be driven by our needs rather than governed in accord with our values, and indeed we might lack any commitments that could properly be called values. In such circumstances, if we qualified as autonomous agents, this would be an attenuated form of autonomy.² In this way, living in a society is a precondition of fully autonomous agency. This is ironic, given that, at the same time, a person's values are so influenced by the culture of the society in which she lives that it can seem doubtful that a life governed by them could qualify as self-governed no matter what else might be true of it.

I begin this paper with a discussion of the idea of autonomous agency. I then turn to the idea that living in a society is a precondition of fully autonomous agency. Finally, I discuss the idea that the influence of the society's culture on our values is incompatible with our being autonomous agents.

1. Autonomous Agency and the Agent's Values

I hold that autonomous agency – self-governed agency – consists in part in governing one's life in accord with one's values. Unfortunately this is not an

² Kymlicka 1995, ch. 5, esp. 82-84.

idea I can develop or explain in any detail in this essay.³

The literature on autonomous agency is primarily concerned to explain how we can be autonomous despite the possibility of causal determinism. The *explanandum* in this literature is free intentional action. The *explanandum* of my project is action that is autonomous in a different, ‘thicker’ sense, as I will explain. It is intentional action that is ‘governed’ by the agent or ‘regulated’ or ‘controlled’ by her. Cases of weakness of will might count as autonomous action in a thinner sense, but in general they do not count as autonomous in the thick sense that concerns me because weakness of will involves a failure to govern oneself. Moreover, actions that are motivated by desires that are unknown to or unacknowledged by the agent might count as autonomous in the thinner sense, but they do not count as autonomous in the thick sense because they involve failures of control.⁴

To be autonomous, even in the thin sense, one must meet conditions of two kinds. There are ‘internal’ psychological conditions, including the requirements of being able to make decisions, to form intentions, and to act on one’s intentions, and there are ‘external’ conditions, including social

³ In this section, I follow the reasoning in Copp 2005.

⁴ Michael Smith discusses the case of a man who always takes the longer of two routes home at the end of the day. The man says that his reason is that the longer route takes him past a news agent where he can buy a foreign paper that interests him. But in fact he is a very vain person and, unknown to him, he is motivated by the fact that there are several mirrors along the way, as well as windows, in which he can see his image reflected. See Smith 1994.

conditions, such as the requirement of being free of certain kinds of interference, including coercion and manipulation.⁵ For my purposes in this paper, we can set aside the external requirements of autonomous agency. The idea I will be pursuing, that autonomous agency requires governing one's life in accord with one's values, is an idea about an internal requirement. I take it to be the most important internal requirement.

To understand the thicker notion of self-governing agency, we need to focus on the idea of *governing* something, understood as a matter of regulating the thing, or exercising systematic control. Consider the idea of a self-governing state. In such a state, law and public policy originate in decisions of the government. In a state that is self-governing in only the thinner sense, these decisions might result merely from temporary accommodations of conflicting and competing conceptions of the direction the state should be taking. Law and public policy could swing between extremes, each extreme position being adopted in accord with procedures that are provided for in the constitution, but having no stability, so that laws and policies are abandoned almost as soon as they are adopted and replaced with radically different laws and policies. Such a state is self-governing in a thin sense. But in a state that is self-governed in a thicker sense, public life is governed or regulated in a way that is not merely the kaleidoscopic outcome of a struggle between competing forces. In such a state, decisions about law and public policy are regulated by abiding concerns or goals and not merely by temporary ad hoc coalitions of interests. I say that these concerns or goals are 'abiding', but I do not mean they are literally unalterable. If a state is self-governing in the thick sense, it is able to

⁵ See, for example, Oshana 1998.

reconsider its goals, and to change them. Yet its goals and concerns regulate the government's decisions, and provide them with a stable direction.

By analogy, autonomous agency is agency that is controlled or regulated by the agent.⁶ But if a person is self-governing merely in the thinner sense, her actions might result merely from temporary agreement among competing and conflicting conceptions of what is fundamentally important in her life. Or she might be driven by whatever desire merely happens to be the strongest. An agent who is self-governing in the thicker sense that interests me, however, is not simply driven by the strongest desire. She is able to ignore temptations, for example. She has abiding concerns and ends and she selects which desires to satisfy in light of these concerns and ends. She shapes her life in accord with these concerns and ends. These concerns and ends are not fixed, however, even though they are stable and 'abiding'. An autonomous agent has the ability to reconsider them and to change.

The ability to decide which of our desires to act on is part of what is involved in the ability to plan.⁷ In planning, we decide among alternative courses of behavior, and we settle on priorities and strategies for achieving our priorities. If we are self-governing in the thick sense, we control and regulate our actions systematically on the basis of such plans and we plan in the light of more fundamental background policies. A person who is autonomous merely in the

⁶ For a valuable discussion of the agential control of action, see Fischer and Ravizza 1998.

⁷ Michael Bratman stresses the ability we have to decide whether to take the object of a desire to be an end (1996). Bratman cites Cohon 1993.

thin sense might have plans and policies, of course, but if so, she might fail in various ways to control or regulate her action systematically on the basis of these plans and policies. She might follow her plans only in a haphazard manner; or her decisions might not reflect the priorities she has settled on in her planning. Hence, an agent can be autonomous in the thin sense without being self-governing in the thick sense that interests me.

As I understand things, our ‘values’ are among our most fundamental concerns, ends, and policies. The values of an agent who is autonomous in the thick sense constrain and shape her less fundamental policies and goals. Moreover, although an autonomous agent can act on urges and desires, she indulges them within boundaries set by her values. So, I say, a person who is self-governing in the thick sense regulates or controls her actions on the basis of intentions and plans that serve her values, or are at least constrained by her values, such that serving those intentions and plans does not conflict with her values.

We can explicate the distinction between autonomy in the thin sense and autonomy in the thick sense by invoking a conception of the agent’s ‘practical standpoint’, to use Michael Bratman’s term.⁸ This can be understood, roughly, as the set of conative states of the person that must control her behavior as a necessary condition of her qualifying as self-governed in the thicker sense. My proposal is that a person’s values constitute her practical standpoint. I think that a person’s values are part of her ‘identity’; they constitute that part of her identity that is concerned *inter alia* with plans for her life – plans which are such that her beliefs about her success or failure in accomplishing them ground

⁸ Bratman 2004, 42.

emotions of esteem. I do not have the space to develop this idea in detail here.⁹

Consider, however, the things that we value. In a typical case a person values her friendships and her friends, her family and family members, and her own happiness. In a typical case, perhaps, a person also values the things, valuing which or the pursuit of which is constitutive of, or ideal for, her career or life-plan. Hence, a philosopher might value knowledge and getting clear about philosophical questions. A plumber might value giving satisfaction and high quality work to clients. In a typical case as well, a person would presumably have moral values. She might value being honest and trustworthy and fair in her dealings with other people. A person's self-esteem rests inter alia on how well she believes she is doing in pursuing or securing or exemplifying what she values. She will feel good about herself to the extent that she believes she is succeeding and she will feel bad about herself to the extent that she feels that she is failing.

The basic idea, then, is that our values are concerns, ends, and policies that are deep psychological features of ourselves in the sense that success or failure in securing them grounds emotions of esteem that reveal the shape of our self-conception. It is because of this that, I say, an agent's values figure in her

⁹ The use of the expression "identity of the person" to express a psychological notion of the sort I have in mind, rather than a metaphysical notion, is fairly recent. The term "identity" does not appear with the relevant meaning in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933) until the 1976 *Supplement*, where the term "identity crisis" is given, with the first cited usage being 1954. I explain my understanding of this conception of a person's identity – or 'self-esteem identity' – in Copp 2002.

identity. And given that a person's values are concerns, ends, and policies with practical import, it is plausible to think of a person's values as constituting her 'practical identity'. Because of this, it seems plausible to say in turn that an agent qualifies as self-governed in the thick sense only if she regulates her life on the basis of her values. The actions of an agent who is self-governed in the thick sense 'express' the agent's identity.

2. Societies and Cultures

Given this understanding of autonomous agency in the thick sense, living in a society is arguably a precondition of autonomous agency. (In what follows, I often do not mention the qualification, "in the thick sense.") That is, it seems, we would not be autonomous unless we were or had been subject to influences of a kind that only a society makes available, influences that enable us to have values. Let us consider this idea.

One question that arises immediately is the question of what societies are. The concept of a society that I shall be working with should be familiar. Societies are groups that are relatively comprehensive of the various functions and roles required for a group to be self-sufficient. Societies typically are organized into states, but this is not necessary. Societies must therefore be distinguished from states. And they must be distinguished from 'nations' since their members do not necessarily identify with the society in the way that the members of a nation identify with the nation, and a society need not have any political aspirations. As with states and nations, however, membership in a society is inherited at birth, although a person can leave one society and join another. Societies are

multi-generational in two senses. Their membership at any time includes members of several generations. Moreover, their existence extends through several generations in time. They are territorial, and their membership includes virtually everyone residing permanently in their territories. Societies have permeable borders, however, and their borders are not in general publicly acknowledged in the way the borders of states are generally acknowledged. A society provides its members with a framework for their lives, for most of their important relationships are with other members of the society. The people that the members of a society interact with, in securing the material necessities of their lives as well as in pursuing cultural priorities are, by and large, also members of the society. And such interactions are governed by norms that are widely shared in the society and that facilitate successful cooperation. In light of this discussion, I shall assume the following rough definition.

A society is (1) a multi-generational temporally extended population of persons, embracing (2) a relatively closed network of relationships of friendship, affection, kinship, and cooperation in reproduction, and (3) limited by the widest boundary of a distinctive and salient system of norm-governed instrumental interaction that facilitates pursuit of the necessities of life and the priorities of the group's culture.¹⁰

Notice that the group of all humans that have ever lived has the first two

¹⁰ Copp 1995, 128 and, for an extended discussion, ch. 7. See also Copp 1997, 190-92.

characteristics mentioned in this definition, for this group is a multi-generational temporally extended population of persons characterized by a relatively closed network of relationships of friendship, affection, kinship, and cooperation in reproduction. Therefore if we are to imagine a situation in which we do not live in a society, the crucial characteristic is the third one. We need to imagine a situation in which, if we live in a social group of some kind, it is one that lacks a 'culture' and a system of norms 'governing interaction'. A group would not strictly speaking qualify as a society even if it had a culture or a system of norms if those norms did not facilitate "pursuit of the necessities of life and the priorities of the group's culture." But it will simplify matters if we ignore this unrealistic possibility. Moreover, a group would not count as a society if it lacked a 'culture', no matter how rich its shared life. But we can also ignore this unrealistic possibility.

I now need to explain the idea of a 'culture'. In a broad sense, we can count as a group's culture the set of ideas, beliefs, values, conventions, norms, goals, or practices that is shared (other things being equal) by the adult members of the group and passed on through socialization to new generations of members.¹¹ This account presupposes that a group with a culture is multi-generational, and it presupposes that the child of a member of a group with a culture normally becomes a member of the group. Nevertheless, it allows that a group that is not a society could qualify as having a 'culture'. This way of understanding a culture serves our purposes here, for if we are going to use the idea of a culture

¹¹ To properly explain this, we would need to make use of the idea of a defeasible generalization as it is explicated in Lance and Little 2004.

in explaining the idea of a society, we obviously need to explain the idea of a culture without invoking the idea of a society. Following Will Kymlicka, we may say that a “societal culture” is a set of ideas, beliefs, values, conventions, norms, goals, or practices that provides people who share it with a conception of “meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres.”¹² In the contemporary world, Kymlicka points out, a societal culture is typically embodied in institutions and practices.¹³ But we have to allow for the cultures of primitive societies that are not institutionalized, so for our purposes here, it is best to think of a culture, as I have proposed, as a set of ideas and the like.

I should clarify that societies can overlap in the way that the French and Basque societies overlap and one society can be nested within another in the way that Quebec society is nested within the North American society. Moreover, as these examples illustrate, a single society can be characterized by more than a single societal culture. A single society must be characterized by a culture, but the present point is that this culture need not be homogenous. Hence there is a Canadian society and culture, but it contains Québécois society and culture.

Let us return, then, to the idea that we would not be autonomous unless we were or had been subject to influences of a kind that only a society makes available. We want to ask whether living in a society is in this way a

¹² Kymlicka 1995, 76.

¹³ Ibid.

precondition of autonomous agency. That is, we want to ask whether we could be autonomous if we had never lived in a society, or if we had always lived in a 'state of nature'. A state of nature of the relevant kind would be a situation in which, even if people live in groups of some kinds, these groups do not have cultures, and none of them is governed by a system of norms that "facilitates pursuit of the necessities of life and the priorities of the group's culture." They certainly lack what Kymlicka calls societal cultures.

People living in a state of nature might share a language. For even if a group with a language must have been a part of a society at one time, it is possible for a group to have a language at a certain time without being a society, or even a part of a society, at that time. A group with a language shares a system of linguistic norms, but it need not also share norms governing interaction in "pursuit of the necessities of life and the priorities of the group's culture." It need not share norms of the kind mentioned in my account of a society.

People living in a state of nature might live in family groups with mates and offspring, and these groups could be tied together by mutual feelings of affection as well as by need. But even if so, these groups would not be 'families' of the familiar kind. They would not be governed by a system of norms specifying roles and duties, for example, since a group in the state of nature would not have a culture, and would not be characterized by a system of norms that facilitates pursuit of the necessities of life.¹⁴

¹⁴ Certain kinds of ideas and beliefs could perhaps be shared without being of the right kind for the set of them to constitute a culture. I shall have to trust that the idea is

In imagining a state of nature, then, we are imagining a situation in which the people living in a territory do not share a culture or a system of norms governing interaction directed toward securing the necessities of life, nor do these people belong to any groups that share a culture or such a system of norms. These people do not share norms governing the terms of cooperation, nor do they belong to any groups that share such norms. There is no set of ideas, beliefs, values, conventions, norms, goals, or practices that constitutes a culture that is shared by the adults living in the territory and that is passed on through socialization to their children, nor do these people belong to groups that share a culture and that pass on this culture to new generations of members.

3. Living in Society as a Precondition of Autonomous Agency

Kymlicka writes that membership in a societal culture enables autonomy,¹⁵ but he seems to intend the stronger claim that membership in a societal culture is needed, if a person is to be autonomous. He writes, “For meaningful individual choice to be possible, individuals need not only access to information, the capacity to reflectively evaluate it, and freedom of expression and association.

clear enough for my purposes here. An example might be ideas and beliefs about ancestry. Perhaps all the members of a group believe that so and so is their ancestor and share the idea that the local weather is rainy. These are shared ideas and beliefs, but not interesting ones for our purposes. For one thing, they are not sufficiently rich and comprehensive to constitute a culture.

¹⁵ Kymlicka 1995, 94.

They also need access to a societal culture.”¹⁶ He explains that “freedom involves making choices amongst various options, and our societal culture not only provides these options, but also makes them meaningful to us.”¹⁷ He writes that “it is only through having access to a societal culture that people have access to a range of meaningful options.”¹⁸ He agrees with Ronald Dworkin that culture “provides the spectacles through which we identify experiences as valuable.”¹⁹ We make choices based on our beliefs about the value of things, including social practices, and, Kymlicka claims, “to have a belief about the value of a practice is, in the first instance, a matter of understanding the meanings attached to it by our culture.”²⁰

Kymlicka is not claiming that all the members of group with a given societal culture have the same values.²¹ People are able to reject the dominant values of their societal culture. As Kymlicka writes, “people can stand back and assess moral values and traditional ways of life.”²² But he agrees with Margalit and Raz that “familiarity with a culture determines the boundaries of the imaginable.”²³ He holds that a person’s sense of the available options – her sense of ways of life that she could choose and her sense of ways of life that

¹⁶ Ibid., 83-84. He says he is writing of “general trends” (Ibid, 90).

¹⁷ Ibid., 83.

¹⁸ Ibid., 83.

¹⁹ Ibid. Quoting Dworkin 1985, 228.

²⁰ Kymlicka 1995, 83.

²¹ Ibid., 105.

²² Ibid., 92.

²³ Ibid., 89, quoting Margalit and Raz 1990, 449.

would be valuable – is powerfully affected by the nature of the societal culture.

In presenting this argument, Kymlicka is addressing the relation between membership in a societal culture and the kind of individual freedom valued in political liberalism. Our concern is somewhat different since I am interested in the relation between membership in a society and the thick notion of autonomous agency. Nevertheless, Kymlicka's argument is helpful and I will draw on it while also rejecting certain aspects of it.

I believe it to be logically and conceptually possible for a person to be autonomous in a state of nature and I do not believe that Kymlicka would disagree. The issue is rather whether it is a true 'law-like' generalization even if only a 'defeasible' generalization, that a person needs to be, or to have been, a member of a society in order to be autonomous.

In recent work, Mark Lance and Margaret Little have explicated the idea of a defeasible law-like generalization. One of their examples is the proposition expressed by the sentence, "Other things being equal, fish eggs develop into fish." This proposition is not merely a statistical generalization for it is true even if most fish eggs are eaten by predators and therefore fail to develop into fish. As Lance and Little explain, the proposition in question is not the claim that the connection between being a fish egg and developing into fish "always, or even usually, holds, but that the conditions in which it does hold are particularly revealing of that item's nature." Cases in which fish eggs develop into fish, Lance and Little add, are taken as "*privileged*, in one way or

another.”²⁴ Hence, the proposition in question is, roughly, the proposition that it is in the nature of fish eggs that when all goes well they develop into fish.²⁵

There are many plausible examples of defeasible generalizations. Consider, for example, the propositions expressed by the sentences, “Cats have four legs,” and “Human beings have two biological parents.” There are exceptions to these generalizations, and we can imagine circumstances in which more cats have three legs than four and in which a majority of humans have been cloned. Yet the relevant defeasible generalizations would still be true provided it remained true under the imagined circumstances that it is in the nature of cats to have four legs and that it is in the nature of humans to have two biological parents.

²⁴ Lance and Little 2004, 441, see also 438, 446-47.

²⁵ It is often said that a law-like generalization ‘supports counter-factuals’. See Lance and Little 2004, 444. The idea is that if it is a true law-like generalization that all As are Bs, it is also true that if something were an A it would be a B. By this test, the claim that all the coins in my pocket are nickels is not law-like, for even if it is true, it is not also true that if this quarter were in my pocket it would be a nickel. Consider, then, the claim that it is in the nature of fish eggs that when all goes well they develop into fish. The idea is that if this claim is true and law-like, then it is also true that if something were a fish egg, then if all went well it would develop into a fish. This test does not apply straightforwardly to the claim that other things being equal a person needs to have been a member of a society in order to be (thickly) autonomous. The idea, however, is that if this claim is true and law-like, it is also true that if a person had not been a member of any society, then other things being equal he would not have been a (thickly) autonomous agent.

The idea we want to explore is that it is a true defeasible law-like generalization that a person could not be autonomous if she had never lived in a society. To be sure, it is possible to be an autonomous person who never lived in a society. But, following Lance and Little, the idea is that the conditions under which autonomy rests on membership in a society is revealing both of the nature of autonomy and of the nature of persons.

The key point is that a (thickly) autonomous agent regulates her life on the basis of her values, where a person's values are deep psychological features that ground emotions of esteem and thereby reveal the shape of her self-conception. The reason that we could not be autonomous if we had not lived in a society is two-fold. First, we would not then have values, and second, even if we had values, we would not then regulate our lives on the basis of our values. These claims are intended as defeasible generalizations. Let me consider them in turn, beginning with the first.

First, outside of a society, in a hypothetical state of nature, even if we managed to survive, it is unlikely that we would have any values. For consider what is involved in having values. One requirement is conceptual. We cannot value friendship if we lack the concept of friendship. In a state of nature, where there are no norms governing interaction directed toward securing the "necessities of life" or the "priorities of the culture," it is not likely that we would have a rich conceptual repertoire. For it is not likely that we would in such circumstances develop concepts of arrangements or conditions or states of affairs or relationships that are not likely to exist and that we lack any cultural tradition of pursuing. So if we had values, they would be conceptually rather simple, it

seems to me. Two other requirements are psychological. We do not value friendship if we do not have a stable policy of pursuing friendships. And it seems unlikely that we would have stable policies of the relevant kind to pursue such things as friendship if we lived in a situation where cooperation depended on a convergence of self-interested motivation, as I assume it would, in a state of nature. In such a situation, we would be preoccupied with pursuing the basic necessities of life. Furthermore, we do not value friendship if our self-esteem does not rest in an appropriate way on our pursuit of friendship. If we value friendship, we feel better about ourselves to the extent that we embrace friendships and care about the good of our friends and so on, and we feel bad about ourselves to the extent that we fail in these things. But in a state of nature, where there is no culture and where no norms govern interaction, it seems unlikely that we would attach emotions of these kinds in the indicated way to success and failure in pursuing various policies, such as policies regarding friendships. All in all, then, it is unlikely that we would have any values in a state of nature.

As Kymlicka and others have argued, a society's culture provides us with examples of ways of life and models for ideal ways of life and so it assists us to see what we might value. This is all lacking outside a society. Moreover, in a society there are norms governing cooperative interaction that underwrite stable expectations as to how life will go and as to the possibility of cooperative endeavor. This is also lacking outside a society. Without these things, it seems to me, we would not likely have values.

Second, if we lived in a state of nature, then assuming that we could manage to

survive at all, we would be driven by our needs into a way of life. For outside of a society, with no norms governing cooperative interaction, we would largely have to fend for ourselves. There would not be an infrastructure of the kind we take for granted in a well-functioning society. Our lives would be driven by our needs rather than governed in accord with our values, if we had any. And as I have suggested, it is likely that we would lack any commitments that could properly be called values. In such circumstances, if we qualified as autonomous agents, this would be an attenuated form of autonomy rather than autonomy in the thicker sense that I am investigating.²⁶

Given these two lines of thinking, it seems to me plausible that living in a society is a precondition of (thickly) autonomous agency. As I have explained, this claim is intended as a defeasible law-like generalization. Rosalind Hursthouse points out that it is highly plausible that, to be healthy, one needs regular exercise and one must not smoke. But as she says, regular exercise and refraining from smoking do not guarantee health, nor are they strictly necessary conditions of being healthy.²⁷ In a similar way, my claim is not that living in a society is strictly speaking a necessary condition of autonomy. The connection between living in a society and autonomy is defeasible, but it is revealing of the nature of autonomy and of the nature of persons. Our ability to govern our lives in accord with stable policies that figure in our self-conception and underlie the operation of our emotions of esteem depends on the resources provided to us by a society.

²⁶ Kymlicka 1995, ch. 5, esp. 82-84. Oshana 1998.

²⁷ Hursthouse 1999, 172-73.

4. Self-Government and the Social Construction of Values

I now turn to the idea that the influence of the society's culture on our values is incompatible with our being autonomous agents. For my purposes, I shall bracket concerns about the compatibility of causal determinism with free will. The distinction between agency that is governed and regulated in accord with the person's values and agency that is not so governed seems to me to be worth drawing even if we worry that in a deterministic world we might lack some important condition of autonomy. But I shall here set aside this worry and assume that some form of compatibilism is true. That is, I shall assume, even if all of our actions are causally determined by antecedent events together with the laws of nature, it remains possible that we are thinly autonomous and it also remains possible that we are thickly autonomous. This means that to be of interest to us here, an argument to show that the influence of the society's culture on our values is incompatible with our being autonomous agents must rest on something other than the premise that causal determinism is true.

In cases in which a person's socialization involves manipulation or coercion, it is arguable that the external requirements of autonomous agency are not met, so that the person cannot qualify as autonomous. But socialization does not necessarily involve coercion or manipulation. And on the assumption that some form of compatibilism is true, I believe it is logically and conceptually possible for a person to be autonomous even though her values have been influenced by the local culture in all the ways that a person's values are normally influenced during socialization. But these points do not begin to

settle the interesting question. The interesting question is whether it is a true, defeasible, law-like generalization that a person's socialization undermines or compromises her autonomy. The issue is whether it is a defeasible law-like truth that the influence of the society's culture on our values defeats or undermines our autonomy.

The kind of influence at issue between the culture and our values is causal, but it is mediated by the 'content' both of our values and of the culture. Values are 'intentional' states that have a 'content' or are about something, such as friendship or happiness. A culture is a set of shared ideas and the like, and these are also intentional states. So the influence of the culture on our values is between intentional states. Moreover, its operation depends on both the content of the culture and the content of our values. In these respects, it is analogous to the kind of influence that can lead to religious conversion.

Suppose, for example, that Mr. Lonely, a lonely, unhappy, and vulnerable person with no religious convictions, meets someone recruiting for a religious cult. The member of the cult befriends Mr. Lonely and takes him into the group. He gradually loses his sense of loneliness and unhappiness and comes to build his well-being around being accepted in the group. The result is that he would be psychologically devastated to feel he did not belong. Since the group is characterized in part by a set of shared values, he takes on board these values. Once he has been socialized, he is accepted as a member of the group. He comes to value the same things that are valued in the group's culture.

In the course of his socialization into the group, Mr. Lonely might have been

manipulated. Members of the cult might have threatened in subtle ways to withhold or to withdraw their acceptance of him, and in this way they might have put him under severe pressure to adjust his values to the culture of the group. If he was manipulated in these ways, Mr. Lonely's autonomy was compromised by his conversion. For a person who is manipulated does not meet one of the external requirements of autonomy. His autonomy is compromised with respect to decisions affected by the manipulation.

This is not the scenario I want to discuss, however. I want to discuss a scenario in which the conversion process that Mr. Lonely went through was not manipulative. Of course, we are supposing that Mr. Lonely would not have been accepted as a member of the group if he had not come to accept the values of the cult. The important point, however, is that there need not have been any manipulative intent on the part of the members of the cult and neither they nor Mr. Lonely need have realized how much psychological pressure Mr. Lonely was facing. In this sense, the process that Mr. Lonely went through might not have been manipulative. But even if the process was not manipulative, we might still think that Mr. Lonely's autonomy was compromised if his own critical faculties were not involved in a decision to change his values and if he did not exert control over the change in his values. Autonomy is a matter of degree. Mr. Lonely might have qualified as autonomous before he joined the cult. And we can assume that, after his conversion, he governs his life on the basis of his new values and that he therefore qualifies as autonomous at least to this extent. A person can be autonomous with respect to certain aspects of his life, but not with respect to others, and his autonomy can be compromised without being eliminated. Even in this first non-manipulative scenario, we

might think, Mr. Lonely's degree of autonomy is reduced.

Imagine, however, a different non-manipulative scenario. In this scenario, Mr. Lonely was aware of what was happening to him and decided to allow it to happen, and in making this decision he was guided by his values and exercised his own critical faculties. Perhaps, for example, he valued friendship and a sense of belonging and saw that the best way of realizing these values in his life was to allow himself to be acculturated by the cult. In this case, I submit, there need not have been any compromising of Mr. Lonely's autonomy. This scenario is relevantly similar to cases in which a person's values are shaped by the culture of a society that she joined as a mature adult, foreseeing how her values would change. So it seems to me that a person's values can be deeply influenced as a result of acculturation without this in any way undermining or compromising her autonomy.

In the usual case, however, our values are formed by a process of acculturation that takes place while we are children, and we are not aware of what is happening to us. We need to decide what to think about this kind of case, and we are not going to be helped in this by thinking about the case where Mr. Lonely was aware of what was happening to him and decided to allow it to happen. We need to return to the first non-manipulation scenario, and provide more detail. Suppose now that Mr. Lonely does not understand the effect that his joining the cult will have on his values. He does not realize while he is being socialized that his values are being shaped by the process he is undergoing, and he makes no decision to allow his values to be affected by the process. In such a case, as I said, it seems plausible that Mr. Lonely is not fully

autonomous during the process of acculturation. Important changes are taking place in his values, and he is capable of understanding these changes, and he is also capable of deciding either to resist them or to allow them to happen, but he is not sufficiently self-aware and nor is he sufficiently strong psychologically to govern his life in accord with his values in this important respect. So he is less than fully autonomous during this period in his life. There can be cases in which a person's autonomy is compromised by a process of acculturation.

The usual case of socialization is, however, relevantly different from this case in several important respects. In the usual case, a person's values are shaped by a process of acculturation that takes place while she is a child. In the usual case, a person's socialization is an innocent product simply of her being brought up by a family in a given social context. A child begins without having any values. She is a blank slate. It is not merely that important changes take place in the values of a child during her socialization. Moreover, a child who is being socialized is not typically capable of understanding what is happening to her as she is socialized, and is not capable of preventing herself from acquiring the values she will acquire as a result. Nor is she capable, at least at the earliest stages of socialization, of deciding whether to resist her socialization or to allow it to happen. A child is not aware of what is happening when she is being socialized, at least not in the earliest stages, nor has she made any decision that has put her into the position she is in. Given all of this, it would be a mistake to think that our conclusion in the last scenario involving Mr. Lonely supports the conclusion that the normal process of acculturation that all of us have been through has compromised our autonomy due to its influence on our values.

It will help to set aside the examples involving Mr. Lonely and to consider a science fictional example in which we build an agent in a laboratory. This case will be more closely similar to the case of ordinary socialization than any of the Mr. Lonely examples. We build a robot, let us say, and then we ‘implant’ in its ‘brain’ a set of values. In so doing, we are not manipulating or coercing an agent who is already autonomous, for by hypothesis, there is no agent until we are finished and turn on the switch. I submit that the fact that in this process we implant the robot’s values in its brain does not mean that it is impossible for us to succeed in building an autonomous agent. It is not impossible that the robot we build is in the end an autonomous agent. Whether it is autonomous depends on whether it goes on to govern its life in accord with its values. If it does, then, it seems to me, it might well be autonomous even though its values were implanted in it.²⁸ The fact that its values were implanted does not entail that it is not autonomous.

If this is correct, then it seems to me that a child who is socialized in such a way that she comes to accept the values of her society might well be autonomous despite the fact that she has the values she has only because of a process over which she had no control. The fact that she had no control over the formation of her values and that her values were not autonomously chosen does not entail that she is not autonomous.

More than this, I think that the fact that children normally have no control over

²⁸ I do not say that the robot is autonomous under this condition for, as I have said, there is more to being autonomous than merely governing one’s life by one’s values.

the formation of their values has nothing to do with whether they are autonomous. The socialization of a child is not relevantly similar to the acculturation of Mr. Lonely into the values of the cult. There are some scenarios involving Mr. Lonely in which it is plausible to say that his autonomy is compromised, but the reason it is plausible to say that his autonomy is compromised in these cases is not simply because he was socialized in a way that led to a change in his values. Rather, first, in some of the cases, he understood what was happening to him, or at least he was capable of exercising control, but he failed to do so. He failed to govern this aspect of his life in accord with his values. A child is not capable of exercising control over her own socialization, at least not in the earliest stages of the process, nor does she understand what is happening to her. Moreover, second, in some of the cases, Mr. Lonely was manipulated and he therefore failed to meet an external requirement of autonomy. The socialization of a child does not normally involve manipulation or at least it need not. Third, and most important, Mr. Lonely was an agent with control over his life when he was brought into the cult. A child is formed into an agent by her socialization. So even if the socialization of a child does involve some manipulation, it does not involve the manipulation of an agent who would otherwise be autonomous. There is therefore no violation of the external requirement according to which manipulation undermines autonomy. There is no autonomy to undermine.

The issue I have been addressing is whether it is a true, defeasible, law-like generalization that a person's socialization undermines or compromises her autonomy. In other words, the issue is whether it is a true, defeasible, law-like generalization that the influence of the society's culture on our values defeats or

compromises our autonomy. I say that the answer to this question is in the negative. Indeed, as I argued in the preceding section, living in a society is a precondition of autonomous agency. We now understand why this is so. People initially acquire their values as children, as a result at least in part of a process of socialization over which they have no control. This process is part of the process by which they become capable of autonomous agency. The fact that a person has no control over the biological process that led to her existence does not mean that she cannot be autonomous. Similarly, the fact that she had no control over the psychological and social process that led (among other things) to her having the values she has does not mean that she cannot be autonomous. These processes are aspects of the overall process that creates agents capable of being autonomous. There is no plausibility to the idea that the mere fact that an agent had no control over the process that created her as an agent means that she is not genuinely capable of being autonomous. I conclude, therefore, that the influence of the society's culture on our values is fully compatible with our being autonomous agents.

The cases we have considered – the religious conversion of an adult, the creation of a robotic agent, and the socialization of a child – can all be accommodated without the need to modify our account of what autonomy consists in. Manipulation and coercion can interfere with a person's autonomy, as we saw in one of the scenarios involving Mr. Lonely and the cult. This is something our account allows for. In one of the non-manipulative scenarios, Mr. Lonely exercised no control over what he saw was happening to him, and his autonomy was thereby compromised because he failed to govern his life in accord with his values. This obviously is compatible with our account. The

fact that children must be socialized in order to have values that enable them to be self-governing is also compatible with our account. Recall that it is central to our account that an agent is autonomous only if she governs her life in accord with her values. It is a true, defeasible, law-like generalization that in order to be autonomous, we need to acquire values through a process of socialization.

5. Conclusion

The fact that our values are not autonomously chosen and that the culture of our society powerfully affects our values can seem to compromise our autonomy. It can seem implausible that we could qualify as autonomous in governing our lives in accord with our values when we have these values only as a result of such influences. I have argued, however, that even though there are ways in which acculturation can undermine the autonomy of a person, the acculturation of a child does not ordinarily undermine her autonomy. On the contrary, it forms her in such a way that she becomes capable of autonomous agency. Indeed, it is a true defeasible law-like generalization that we would not be autonomous if we had not been subject to acculturation. More generally, we would not be autonomous if we did not live in a society. Living in a society is in this way a precondition of fully autonomous agency.²⁹

²⁹ I presented a version of this paper in October, 2006 to the Workshop on the Social Conditions of Autonomy at the Ethics Center of the University of Zurich. I am grateful to all the participants in the workshop for their helpful comments and suggestions, and especially to Anton Leist.

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