

ISSUE 5

*Assisted suicide is/is not morally
supported by the principle of “autonomy”*



*My Path Turns: Looking at
Autonomy and Moral Claims
to the Right to Assisted Suicide*



The concept of autonomy provides the principal moral foundation for the current assisted suicide movement,¹ although, interestingly, some opposed to assisted suicide have attempted to hijack the concept for their own uses.² This concept of autonomy has many faces in both literature and everyday discussions. For some, autonomy takes the form of the inherent right to define oneself through one's own choices. Others characterize it as controlling one's own narrative (i.e., creating the story of who one is). Still others have characterized autonomy as one's right to make significant choices since only in that way does one's life truly become one's own³.

However garbed and ornamented, at the core of each of these variations of the autonomy theme remains the same notion: It is my life, I have ownership of that life, and the freedom to make choices about who I am is what it means for me to have a full human life. Children say, "You can't tell me what to do." The answer to this predictable exercise in self-definition and limit testing is, "Yes I can because I'm your parent" (i.e., "You aren't completely your own person; I have legitimate and likely physical authority over you"). An adult says, "Whose life is this if not mine over which to make choices that do not directly injure others?" That is autonomy honed to its basics.

Of course, no theory of autonomy supports the notion that I can make any choice I wish (e.g., ritual human sacrifice). Those espousing the primary importance of autonomy have always made it clear that I may not do things that hurt others (in the Ten Commandments sense) or violate explicit, enforceable obligations. The religious arguments just add to this limitation. In addition, I must not choose to do things that hurt or offend God. Nevertheless, even persons in this culture who ascribe to these religious arguments believe that they are entitled to make a wide range of choices as to how they will live their lives.⁴

Yet, though I value my own ability to make choices about how I will live my life, I simply cannot conclude that the concept of autonomy provides the moral power to carry the field for those who use it as a blanket endorsement of assisted suicide. My reservations about wholehearted reliance on autonomy follow.

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE PRINCIPLE OF AUTONOMY AS A MORAL BASIS FOR ASSISTED SUICIDE

In my reading, I found that people use *autonomy* like a magic talisman. You just say the word, and that puts an end to all argument. When used this way, autonomy feels like the invocation of some secular “religion.” It has to be accepted on faith and is not open to debate. But it was not clear to me that autonomy, standing alone, was even a *moral* principle. What is the basis for saying that my ability to freely choose who I will be has some kind of moral imprimatur? Admittedly, the idea of perfecting myself, making my life my own, surely resonates well with me. But just saying that doesn’t get me to the point where my choices, solely by virtue of being mine, have moral validity. I think I should be able to choose who I will be, what I’ll wear, where I’ll work, who I’ll wed, where I’ll live, and on and on. I shudder to imagine what it would be like to live in a society in which I did not have this freedom, in which my role was to be an interchangeable cog in the machinery of the state. But I’m an American. I was raised to think that the denial of my autonomy, in the sense that I cannot choose my own path, is “bad.” Countries like that are “evil.” But are they, or am I just an inevitable product of my culture?

Maoist China was repressive in our terms, but the system provided food, education, and health care for hundreds of millions of people who had previously lacked them. Of course, you may respond by asking, “At what price?” That’s a good question, but your notion of price incorporates

and reinserts all *our* values back into the equation. From where we stand, it might not have been worth it. On the other hand, we weren't among half a billion starving Chinese.

You might respond that there must be something in our "nature" as humans that makes autonomy so valued that we will die for the freedom to choose, to speak freely, to vote. When, after all, was the last popular uprising (as opposed to military coup) in a liberal, Western-style democracy complete with a free market? I certainly agree with all that, but, again, I'm an American. Of course, I agree; it's hard to get beyond my lifelong cognitive framework. Yet everything we're now facing in confronting Islamic fundamentalism (i.e., those who wish to return to strict Koranic beliefs and laws) says that there are those who find this notion of unrestricted autonomy anything but a moral principle. Rather, autonomy in the fundamentalist framework would seem to be a handmaiden to immoral behavior. I've thought about this, and I just don't know.

SOCIAL INTERRELATION AND AUTONOMY

I have a problem with the current moral emphasis on the autonomous person because I believe it inaccurately portrays the nature of existence as a human being. It is true that I carry a confirmed sense that I am a unique, separate individual. I walk along "creating" the world around me. There I sally forth, my cartoon bubble over my head encapsulating my thoughts. Beside me walk crowds of others who, like me, are experiencing the same existence: fully autonomous beings with their own cartoon bubbles floating overhead, masters of their own private universes. Each of these others, like me, has a complete world. It is a world composed of things that are passions for the others that never even cross my mind (needlepoint, fly-fishing, restoring antique cars, curling, collecting fountain pens, and so on) and intimates I've never even heard of let alone met. Everyone's close friends likely have close friends whom you do not know. It's funny how we are shocked to find that people we know well are complete strangers to others we know well. It is as if our sense of our individual existence is so strong, the pictures we have of the components of our lives so powerful, that we believe we can bind together in reality what exists only in the perceptions, clutter, and chatter that fill our cartoon bubble.

Yet, in the most basic, simple sense, we are all connected to others.⁵ I drink a soda from a glass. That glass was made by others, is filled with liquid from a product conceived and manufactured by others, was purchased

in a store in which the can was stacked and sold to me by others, and from which I now drink employing conceptions of how to use a glass that I learned from my parents and others. If I were a hermit who had consciously fled to the wilds to avoid the company of fellow humans, I would have gone there, nevertheless, with clothes and tools made by others or made by me with knowledge passed down from others.⁶ In fact, the whole notion of being a hermit depends on the existence of those from whom you separate yourself. Even in the mythical “state of nature,” man was never alone but lived in small family groupings or tribes.

THE BRAIN AND AUTONOMY

Most significantly, it is not just that we are socially and culturally connected to others. We are *cognitively* connected to them as well. My mind was necessarily formed in interaction with the human culture, whether with individuals, groups, media, music, art, literature, cultural artifacts, newspapers, or schools. The combination of all this information and these experiences is the grist from which I built the cognitive structures I use to facilitate understanding and give meaning to my interactions with the world.⁷

Contrary to prior beliefs that thought processes function in direct stimulus-response chains (i.e., you see a chair in the external world and think “chair” in your brain), current theories and research posit that thinking is both active and creative. So, if I’m walking through an art museum and come across an exhibit in which the artist has created fantastic but supposedly functional furniture, I will look at the pieces and compare them to my concept of a chair, a table, and such. Then, when I look at this elaborate, abstract, swanlike construction that matches my cognitive construct (which contemporary theorists term a schema) for a chair, I immediately “see” the possibility of moving it about, know that if I sat in it it would support me, and perhaps even imagine how funny it would look in my living room. If, in fact, it would not support an average person, I was mistaken. I chose the wrong schema. The object should have been interpreted by my schema of an artistic sculpture and not of a chair.

We have schemas, ranging from simple “patterns” to complex models, that cover the endless aspects of life—car (driver), car (passenger), car (fill-up at the gas station), car (taking it to the car wash), car (buying), car (selling), and on and on. And, again, these schemas are created from our interactions in society (what we’re told, our culture, experiences, stories, myths,

and so on). Therefore, our brains are really an accumulation of mental constructs of the external world through which we filter and interpret the data of day-to-day experience. Our “autonomous selves” are necessarily creations of a history with a community, a history that began long before we existed.

THE NOTION OF MAINTAINING A LIFE STORY

Some have found a moral foundation for suicide at the end of life (when the person is facing total physical degeneration and dependence) based on the notion of maintaining the coherence and integrity of a person’s “life story.”⁸ The dying person has always been strong, in control, relied on by others. This failing person is not the character he or she has been or wants to be in the last act. So assisted suicide is an appropriate way to avoid an end that would violate the character and integrity of this person’s life story.

Yet, as was the case with the general notion of autonomy, I find the notion of maintaining a coherent life story to be something of an illusion. What I perceive as “my” story is totally constructed in my mind, in which I impose a plausible interpretive theory over what really is a series of often fragmented pieces. It is a story determined by interpretive choices, which themselves are a function of my culturally constructed schemas. Am I a success or a failure? Look at Jimmy Stewart in that ultimate holiday classic *It’s a Wonderful Life*. The answer depends on how I choose to tell the story, which pieces I leave in, which I take out; what I choose to emphasize and deemphasize, and what theory of success or failure I rely on to make these artistic decisions. In a movie role, you might have a coherent story because there’s a script, editing, and 90 minutes to take you from early youth to heroic death. In real life, there is no single story; it’s all selection, spin, and construction.

The story of who I am, moreover, can completely change at different times and stages of my life. Some stages can be under my control, a product of conscious choice involving clothing, hairstyle, and pastimes to match. Other plot changes are not within my control. The nation goes to war, I win the lottery, or I’m diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

Let me refocus on the idea of tying the moral entitlement to assisted suicide to maintaining the integrity and coherence of one’s life story. Those espousing this notion must not be referring to how people *really* are but to how they want to have others see them and how they wish ultimately to perceive themselves. Even if control is central to how they iden-

tify themselves, the point is that much of life is beyond their control. My father no doubt wanted us to remember him as capable and in control, not helpless, confused, and in agony (although, admittedly, he may not have cared what anyone thought, only what he thought of himself or maybe just getting the pain under control). But no matter what he wanted or did not want, he had no power to control how we would see his story. For, like all humans, we interpreted his life through our own constructed cognitions (schemas). I do remember him dying and confused. I do remember him not having the strength to walk a few feet to the bathroom by himself. I do remember what his breathing sounded like when he was dying and what he looked like moments after his death. I also remember him at dozens and dozens of other moments throughout my life, some fondly, some not. He was a very good man, who, like us all, was flawed. I think of him as a man who tried to do his best; who was sweet with a bad temper; and who, when all was said and done, was so very brave. At the end, he became my hero.

Maintaining your fictional persona, holding on to the created story of who you are, even if you have to kill yourself to do it, is something with which I can empathize, but what's the point? You're going to be dead. You don't get to sit and watch the movie portraying you in your lifetime role. Perhaps you want to be remembered as the person you perceive you are. But this is illusion upon illusion. It is illusion to think that anything as complex and chaotic as a human life can have a single, coherent story. It is further illusion to think that, even if you've achieved the creation of such a story, those left behind will perceive the same one. What, after all, did Melville intend when he chose to color the great whale white?

Maybe I'm being too inflexible. We all try to create life stories, and they seem important to us, even if, at their base, they are illusion. Perhaps, then, rather than dismissing the notion of such stories out of hand, we should cling to our storytelling but recognize the need to develop more flexible self-tales, tales that can adapt to the inevitable cycle of life in which (like flowers) most of us will progressively degenerate until we die.⁹