The Moral Irrelevance of Autonomy

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Once upon a time a boy and his gang drew a big circle around themselves and defied anyone else to get in it. A clever fellow, the leader drew the line just large enough to include all those like him but just small enough to exclude everybody else. The outsiders initially paid little attention to the rascals, letting them have their fun. But before long, the boys' temper had worsened considerably, and soon everyone on the beach was sitting up. What they saw was not pretty: the boys grimly ordering everyone else about and slowly kindling a bonfire in their barbecue pit.

The outsiders' responses varied. Some tried discreetly to step over the line, pretending they had been in all along. (This strategy met with mixed success, depending upon how much the marginal types already resembled the fellows.) Others tried various forms of surreptitious gerrymandering, furtively attaching a little blip here, an appendix there, so as to include them and theirs in the circle. (This ploy almost always failed, the eagle-eyed gang being obsessed with its borders.) In general, outsiders stayed outsiders.

The boys had a problem of their own: They could not uniformly agree about who was in and who was out. So just when things seemed to be turning most ugly, the whole menace collapsed from within. One of the boys grabbed the leader's stick and drew a tighter, more conservative, line inside the first one. Then another seized it and reduced the circumference even more. The boys came to words, and then to pointing and shoving. Which one of these lines was the real one? What kind of line is it that lets him in?

The internal feuding spelled the end of the boys' frightening game because you cannot keep people out if you do not know who is in. But it had another unexpected effect. As the insiders separated into warring factions, the outsiders drew strangely together, for the demise of the boys' party opened up a vast new range of activities on the beach. Before long there was all sorts of merry-making: swimming, sunbathing, castle making, dog walking, windsurfing, ice cream eating, kite flying. They all found something they liked doing, and even the boys began to drop their sticks, leave off their fuming, and join the fun.

The moral of the story is this: The end of line-drawing means the beginning of cooperative life.

In previous work, R. G. Frey has argued that the possession of "moral rights" is not the line separating us from nonhuman animals. His reason is not that some animals are inside this line (he denies that any
are), nor that some humans are outside it (he affirms that many are), but rather that the line itself is too fuzzy.1 Talk about moral rights, Frey explains, is unsupported by good arguments and is more successful as rhetoric than as philosophy.2 Frey is a utilitarian who puts little stock in general in the Kantian picture of morality, and so he rejects the "moral rights" line.

He does not reject line-drawing. In a recent article, "Autonomy and the Value of Animal Life," he lays down what he believes is a clearer boundary than any other current candidate: autonomy.3 According to Frey, nonhumans lack moral standing not because they lack what no one probably possesses (rights) but, rather, because they lack what all "normal adult humans" possess: autonomy, the ability to control or make something out of our lives.4

Why should Frey want to shift the burden of the case against animals onto the back of a concept traditionally associated in the most intimate way with that of moral rights? Because he finds it a far less ambiguous notion, not to mention a less controversial one. In the first sentence of the article he claims that autonomy has had "great stress" placed upon it: "in Anglo-American society, [by] virtually every moral theory of any note."5 Because it has received such stress by so many other theorists dealing with so many other kinds of ethical issues, he believes that it may serve as the limiting concept for all inquiries into our moral duties toward animals.

Frey is not alone in focusing attention on this line. One of the best known cases for the moral standing of animals—Tom Regan's case—puts as much weight on autonomy as Frey's case against animals. Regan's strategy if it to try to attach a large bubble to Frey's circle so as to make insiders not only of homo sapiens but of all adult higher mammals. Thus, Regan makes each of the following claims: Many animals "have preferences and have the ability to initiate action with a view to satisfying them;" this constitutes "preference autonomy;" and many animals, possessing such autonomy, must therefore be granted moral considerability.6 Regan does not agree with Frey as to where the line should be drawn, but he does agree that autonomy is the border.

This is not the way for defenders of animals to deal with line-drawers. As Frey correctly suggests, Regan's tack only underscores the importance of the line, contributing that much more heat to the debate about where the line "really" is. The better strategy is to keep one's distance, sneaking into the midst of the fray from time to time to keep everyone honest, but never committing oneself to its ultimate importance. The boys should constantly be reminded about that line previously drawn there, this one so recently and confidently drawn here. This tactic will never defeat the boys directly, but it will buy valuable time. The idea is so to pester all line-drawers with the knowledge of their own inexpertness that they will eventually get frustrated and abandon the enterprise of their own free will.

Far from helping Regan to help Frey set a new line in concrete, I want to sneak in, give their disputed border a good scuffling with my feet, and get out. My intent is to show that autonomy is virtually useless as a line to tell us which beings have and which beings do not have moral standing. My thesis is that we must not trust autonomy to describe the circle outside of which are individuals whom "the way is ... open" to killing and eating.7 I should tell you at the start that I do believe with Frey that animals are not autonomous. But I also believe with Regan and others that we should not kill them and eat them or use more of them in scientific experiments. How can I believe both? Because precious little follows for practical morality from the fact that animals lack the ability to plan or control their lives.

Frey's definition of autonomy is more precise than Regan's "preference autonomy." It has three elements, the first of which is the freedom to act on our own behalf. Autonomy is "our desire to achieve things for ourselves," to make "something of our lives," the way a fledgling philosopher might want to succeed on her own rather than trying to ride on her famous husband's coattails. To illustrate the point Frey tells of an academic acquaintance who was concerned that his untenured wife might not be promoted. The husband suggested that he write some publishable papers which she could take and revise and then submit to journals as her own. The woman was rightly insulted by the idea because she did not want to make something of herself by deceitfully using her husband's work. She wanted to make something of herself by relying on her own talents and powers. She wanted to make something of herself. By rebuffing her husband's attempt to intrude, the woman showed that she was not subject to control by paternalistic outside forces. She was free "of the coercive interference of others."8

The second requirement is freedom from internal coercion. In order to pursue the ends we most cherish, we must not only gain independence from the desires of outsiders, but we must also master our own desires as well. "A certain ordering" of life is necessary if an
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untended professor is to "put herself in a position to be able to produce serious academic work."9 If she does not control her minor impulses, she will be pulled in so many directions that she will not be able to devote herself to the desire she desires most. Self-government means that we are able to forego certain lower-order preferences (e.g., playing in a semi-pro basketball league) in order to pursue higher-order desires (e.g., making associate professor). Frey autonomy requires "internal" as well as "external" freedom, the ability to make higher-order decisions about the relative importance of lower-order desires.

The third requirement is to decide for oneself about the kind of life one wants to lead. The professor who successfully resists the intrusions of her husband and who successfully controls her less desirable desires may still be doing something she has not chosen. Suppose that she is working to be associate professor for no other reason than than her mother was a professor before her and her grandmother before that and she feels, for religious reasons drummed into her as a child, that she ought to do what her family wants. Frey would not call this woman autonomous, because she is not pursuing a career she has chosen for herself. She is pursuing a plan of life that has been imposed upon her. Notice that she has all of the equipment needed to survey a range of possible plans and to select one for herself but simply has not used it. Instead, she has settled for doing the best she can in what she considers "the family’s" line of work. Frey autonomy requires that we think rationally about the variety of conceptions of the good life, deliberately choose one, and consistently pursue it.

Frey calls his version of the line "autonomy as control." Being in control is important for Frey, as his example of a nonautonomous person shows. Imagine a successful businessman who longs to be a painter and yet continues to spend his energies perfecting his father's business. Frey's opinion of such a man is harsh, and he thinks many of us will "doubtless" be struck by how "weak" the man is. Frey puts the matter straightforwardly: "The real charge against this man is servility; he has allowed, for whatever reason, others to impose their conception of the good life upon him."10 Here we see how much weight Frey attaches to the third requirement. You are not autonomous: if you have not selected a plan of life from a range of options, if you have not made up your mind about what you think the good life is, and if you have not taken decisive action to pursue your conception of the good life.

Those who are not autonomous, Frey believes, are morally inferior to those who are autonomous. Denying that all humans have equal moral value, he asserts that the value of someone's life is directly related to its quality.11 Since he thinks that the quality of the moral life of a nonautonomous person is less than the quality of an autonomous person, Frey must also think that we would all be better persons, morally speaking, if we seized control of our lives, took matters into our own hands, and changed careers to pursue the one we most desire.

Frey does not address himself to some of the knottier questions raised by his analysis. Is autonomy intrinsically good or good as a means to another end? Frey seems to think that it is good in itself. But can't we develop our autonomy at the expense of others? Couldn't we strive to become more autonomous in order better to exploit others sexually or coerce them into unearned business favors? Nor does Frey tell us what to think about moral theories in which autonomy has not been heavily accented. Such theories may not be part of something called "the" tradition of Anglo-American moral theory, but they are undeniably part of the moral practices of Brits and Americans: the Land Ethic and environmentalisms; Natural Law, Divine Command, and other religiously based theories; feminist and pragmatist perspectives; all aretic theories that insist on the multiplicity and irreconcilability of the virtues. These theories are not bit players in the actual moral lives of those living in Great Britain and the United States even if they have been largely ignored by most of their moral philosophers. But if few of the alternative theories stress autonomy, why should we think it "central" or noncontroversial?

Nor does Frey address in this article the most troubling question of all: Even if autonomy were demonstrated to be the line separating us from animals, would that justify killing and eating cows or cementing baboon heads into steel sleds and slamming them against walls? May we so treat any and every being that lacks autonomy?

However urgent these questions may be, they are not the ones Frey sets out to answer in the present essay, and I will not pursue them here. Rather, the central claim of his paper is that autonomy is a property of the "normal adult human" and a necessary feature of the good life. It is this claim I wish to contest. Frey could mean it in one of two ways. He could intend it as a descriptive claim, that all "normal adult humans" just are autonomous. This would be an empirical judgment

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about the kinds of lives led by most people in the world. If this were Frey’s intent we would have to do some social-scientific work to find out whether he was right. Lacking the results of such a study and basing my response only on my own experience with what appear to be “normal adult humans,” I must nevertheless say that I find this view fantastic. The majority of “normal adult humans” I know are far from autonomous in Frey’s sense, and I shall shortly introduce you to one.12

But Frey might intend his claim, on the other hand, as a normative judgment—that all normal adults should be autonomous. This is more properly a philosophical judgment, and one with which I disagree. I do not believe that autonomous people necessarily live lives of higher moral quality than less autonomous folk, and the person I will describe below will serve to show why I hold this view as well.

Assume that autonomy is, on the whole and all things considered, a good of one sort or another. In the absence of other considerations it is better to have control over your life than not to do; better to have a life plan than not to have one; better to be internally free than to be tied up by your lesser desires, better to be externally free than to be hamstrung by others’ plans for you.13 Assume further that “the value of life is a function of its quality, its quality a function of its richness, and its richness a function of its scope or potentiality for enrichment.”14 And assume too “that many humans lead lives of a very much lower quality than ordinary normal lives, lives which lack enrichment and where the potentialities for enrichment are severely truncated or absent.”15 From these premises it does not follow, as Frey seems to assume, that beings who are not fully autonomous are beings who either lack moral standing altogether or who would have a higher quality of life if they exercised more control over it.

To see the fallacy of the conclusion consider a normal adult human who lives a life of high moral quality but has never formulated a plan of life. Carrie is a forty-seven-year-old mother of six who not only can “read, do higher mathematics, build a bookcase, [and] make baba ghanoush,” but who also has served in a responsible position as secretary of an elementary school for twenty-five years.16 According to the school’s principal, students refer to Carrie as “Mom” because she loves to serve as a surrogate parent to homesick, confused, and lost kindergartners. She is not hesitant to leave her typewriter to put her arm around a distraught five-year-old, taking her into the faculty lounge for a Kleenex and a doughnut. Graced with superior counselling skills, Carrie is an excellent conflict mediator who quietly but effectively intervenes between faculty and administrators, smoothing out school life in ways that are no less significant for being nigh imperceptible. Here is a moral exemplar who successfully raised her children and then turned her considerable nurturing skills to those with whom she comes in daily contact.

Carrie likes her job and is good at it. Over the years she has developed the skills of an administrative assistant and (while she is still paid secretarial wages) is indispensable to the operation of her institution. Carrie not only knows how to facilitate relationships between cranky teachers, but also how to teach them to load up Lotus and Word Perfect, how to enter, compose, and print the annual budget, and how to finesse travel reimbursements through the school district office for administrators who consistently forget their receipts. But Carrie did not choose her career as a secretary, her career as a mother, or her self-sacrificial way of life. While she finds some measure of fulfillment in being a secretary, she would rather volunteer her time at the local hospital, perhaps even be a nurse, than continue to put up with the inevitable recurring conflicts at school. She hesitates to quit her job, however, because she fears leaving a position which offers her seniority, a measure of self-fulfillment, and reasonably happy working conditions. Moreover, she does not really know how she would go about “changing careers” at this point, and she believes (almost certainly in error) that her husband and middle-aged children are not in a
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position to afford her that luxury. Above all else, Carrie wants her children to be happy and her husband satisfied. Her perception of their needs is more important to her than her other career desires.

Mothering is the activity that gives Carrie the most satisfaction. But is this a deliberately chosen higher-order preference? Surely it is for some women, but this does not seem to be the right way to describe Carrie. Carrie is a reflective and skilled person who has shaped the lives of others in profound ways. But, as she says herself, her satisfaction in mothering is more instinctual than chosen. Raised in a rural area by conservative Catholic parents, Carrie's mothering conception of a good life is more an inherited one than one she has deliberately chosen from a menu. She never remembers having thought about, much less deliberately chosen, a "plan" of life.

Not only does Carrie fail Frey's three-fold criterion for being in the autonomy circle, she does not even want to try to get in. Carrie has paid careful attention to the cultural conditions in which her children were raised, and she is not at all certain that she approves. She has known for a long time how strongly they were encouraged from kindergarten on to "find themselves," to exhibit independence of thought, to formulate a rational life plan, to seek equality with others, to pursue their own happiness. Sometimes she finds this amusing, because when she was growing up, "you didn't have all this agonizing over who you were and where your 'relationships' were going—you just found a man, fell in love, and got married." But other times she is profoundly disturbed by it. She fears that her children have been coerced by their consumeristic culture into placing an overweening importance on their own successes, their own achievements. Being happy is their bottom line. When Carrie was growing up, that was not the bottom line; it was caring for others. By allowing her children to chase autonomy has she also let them lose sight of the value most cherished by her mother?

Sara Ruddick offers a perceptive comment that illuminates Carrie's concern. Ruddick's observation also helps to explain why Carrie does not think she would necessarily be a better person if only she were more independent:

Because [mothers] live through and witness shifting power relations, because they watch firsthand the anxieties of children driven to be equal, mothers would be slow to wish upon themselves or anyone they care for the fearful pursuit of equality. In the maternal view of conflict, it is not necessary to be equal in order to resist violence.17

In Carrie's conception of the good life, resisting violence while nurturing peace is more important than resisting others while nurturing independence. Again, Ruddick helps us to understand the specificity of this kind of life: "The peacemaker asks of herself and those she cares for, not what they can afford to give up, but what they can give; not how they can be left alone, but what they can do together."18

So that you do not misunderstand me, let me add immediately that Carrie is not the sort of "intensely sympathetic," "intensely charming," Victorian woman described by Virginia Woolf in Women and Writing:

She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg, if there was a draught she sat in it—in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others."19

Just as Woolf had to "kill" this "Angel in the House"—herself—before she could write, so Carrie had to kill the "Mother in the Home" before she could go out into the workplace with her youngest child still not in school.20 Carrie is not in the category of self-abasing religious housewives, nor even in the category Diana T. Meyers describes as "the traditional women."21 She is a full moral agent with immense talents in the areas of care, compassion, hospitality, fairness, discernment, responsibility, loyalty, and love. She exhibits, in short, an extremely high quality of moral life. Notice that she is by no means a "less" rather than "more" normal human, much less a marginal one. We are not talking here about someone who has severe brain damage or is seriously mentally-encephalized. We are not talking about a criminal, a ne'er-do-well, or even an apathetic, chocoholic soap opera addict. Carrie is as normal a human as you can find. If she has any distinction, it is only that she is such a good person. Nevertheless, she has not selected a plan of life from a range of options; she has not made up her own mind about what the good life is; and she has not taken decisive action to pursue her conception of the good life.

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Carrie is a reflective, nonautonomous, saint. She does not have control over her life and, moreover, she is incapable of exercising control over her life. And yet the quality of her life is extremely high. Here is a woman who falls outside of Frey’s circle.

To get a clearer picture of the type of individual I have in mind, consider four different types of saints.22 A saint is anyone who lives a self-sacrificial life. A self-sacrificial life is one that consistently promotes the legitimate interests of others while occasionally acting contrary to legitimate interests of the self. Strongly autonomous saints act self-sacrificially because they want to act self-sacrificially. Mother Teresa of Calcutta not only has the ability to reflect critically on her desires but also the freedom of will to change her way of life if she decides, one morning, to leave the poor and get into advertising. Weakly autonomous saints act self-sacrificially because they want to act self-sacrificially. Unlike the strong autonomous saint who energetically affirms and reaffirms her way of life, however, this saint is attracted to other conceptions of the good life. She is unable to switch directions because she lacks the willpower to act on her other desires. She continues to act self-sacrificially, but this is as much because of weakness of will as anything else. Both of these saints fit Frey’s depiction of what he calls normal adult humans. Both are autonomous. And the weakly autonomous saint would be better off if she were to take more control over her life.

Now consider two nonautonomous saints. The strongly nonautonomous saint acts wantonly in a self-sacrificial way. Like Felicité in Flaubert’s short story, “Un Simple Coeur,” this saint’s operative desire is always to relieve the suffering of others, but the desire to relieve suffering is not a desire she has chosen. What is more, this is not a desire she could choose, because nature and nurture have conspired against her to produce a person who lacks freedom of will. In Harry Frankfurt’s apt expression, she “neither has the will nor has a will that differs from the will [she] wants.”23 Driven by psychological and sociological forces beyond her control, Felicité just happens to be a saint rather than a sinner.

Weakly nonautonomous saints, like strongly nonautonomous saints, do not have the power to choose their self-sacrificial way of life. Their operative desires are out of their control, determined by powerful forces of behavioral make-up, habit, and socialization. Unlike the strongly nonautonomous saint, however, this person is conscious of the forces shaping her and is capable of reflecting on her desires. She is sometimes disposed, like Carrie, to want a different way of life. Unfortunately, she lacks the willpower to act on these desires. Like the weakly autonomous saint, the weakly nonautonomous saint is not always happy with the fact that she is a saint instead of an advertising executive.

Carrie is a reflective, weakly nonautonomous, saint. Her will is not free. Yet she is a powerful woman, having shaped the lives of those around her in profound and lasting ways. Her children, her students, her husband, her brothers and sisters, her colleagues at work—all will tell you how dramatic Carrie’s influence has been. Carrie may be nonautonomous, but she nevertheless exercises tremendous power over others, and she does it for their good.

I want to make it clear that when I deny that women like Felicité and Carrie have autonomy I am not denying that so-called “traditional” women have autonomy. As Meyers rightly points out, “the claim that feminine socialization altogether excludes most women from the class of autonomous agents is both morally repugnant and factually unsubstantiated.”24 I am not claiming anything like the repugnant thesis that women are not autonomous. I am claiming only that some women, like some men, lack autonomy, and that lacking autonomy constitutes no reason to downgrade a person’s value. The problem here is that we are trained to interpret “nonautonomy” as a negative judgment about someone’s character when autonomy, in this context, should be a descriptive rather than a normative term. No one would accept a definition of autonomy according to which they did not qualify as autonomous. But if no one fails outside our definition, then the definition is useless. In calling a person nonautonomous, we must keep it firmly in mind that we intend, prima facie, no negative comment about that person.

So I repeat. Carrie is a weakly autonomous saint. But if Frey is right that the way is open to killing and eating nonautonomous beings, then we would be justified in killing and eating Carrie. But that is absurd. Frey might try to save his thesis by denying one of three things about Carrie. He might try to deny that she is a normal adult human. By putting her in the class of severely brain-damaged infants—and cows—he could simply assert that I have not chosen a typical human being as my example. This response is very weak. If Carrie is not a normal adult human then I do...
not know one. We may safely assume that Frey will not try this route of escape.

More plausibly, Frey could try to deny that Carrie lives a life of high moral quality. Such an argument might go as follows. While Carrie has many wonderful qualities and is certainly a normal human, her life would nonetheless be better, morally speaking, if she were to exercise more of her autonomy. By leaving her secretarial job and becoming a nurse she could continue to exercise her mothering and nurturing skills but in an environment she had chosen herself. On this interpretation, Carrie would not qualify as a counter-example of Frey's view at all. Instead, she would serve to reinforce the importance of autonomy as a measure of morality, being one more example of the truth of the claim that a life with less autonomy is of lower quality than a life with more of it.

But this response begs the question. We could only determine that Carrie's life was inferior because it was nonautonomous if we already knew that a nonautonomous life was by definition inferior. Whether one can have a good life and be nonautonomous is precisely the question we have set out to answer, and we cannot answer it by repeating it as an assertion.

But there is another way that Frey could press the objection. He might begin by admitting that Carrie's life is a good one, and that she is not independent, but then go on to claim that her life would nevertheless be a better one if she were to become autonomous. This response is stronger, but it gives away the store by granting my central point: Nonautonomy is compatible with the good life. So if this is the escape route Frey chooses, I shall respond by putting the ball right back into his court, with some English on it: Nonautonomy is not only compatible with a high quality of moral life, but further, autonomy may in some instances diminish the quality of a person's life. How so?

Imagine another secretary, Molly, who is like Carrie in every respect except that Molly chose her job as a secretary. Twenty-five years ago Molly weighed the alternatives, decided on a life plan, ordered her life so as to become a secretary, and then conscientiously pursued her conception of the good life. Molly's quality of life, one can imagine Frey saying, is superior to Carrie's simply because Molly chose her line of work rather than having it foisted upon her.

Now, we already know Frey's complaint about Carrie. It is the same as his charge against the successful businessman: servility. Carrie has allowed others (her husband, her children, her religious relatives) to impose their conceptions of the good life upon her. She proceeds to live them out. To be sure, she is no slave, "but," as Frey says, "we can be servile without being a slave." Frey thinks that Carrie, for all of her good traits, should throw off these external bonds. She should become more Molly-like.

This is an interesting thought experiment, but it makes a couple of problematic assumptions. First, how free was Molly twenty-five years ago when she made her decision? One easily sees behind Molly's choice glossy magazine advertisements for Trend Business College, the happy voices of secretarial friends, 1950s movies about the glamor of big business. In the era of behavioristic psychology, we have learned to distrust confident assertions such as "I and I alone have chosen this line of work over that one." We are sensitive after Freud to the power of subconscious forces on rational processes, and we no longer are certain that the quality of the lives of people who avow that they have chosen their conception of the good life is better than the quality of those people's lives who—perhaps more candidly—admit that they probably have not chosen their conception of the good life. Self-deception is more likely to plague the person who imagines herself autonomous than the person who acknowledges that she is not. There are good reasons to think that Molly's allegedly autonomous choice was not autonomous at all.

Of course, if this Molly's choice was not autonomous, that Molly's choice could have been. So let us now consider the Molly who really was making the choice for herself. Couldn't Carrie be a better person by adopting more of this Molly's assertiveness and independence? No, for the following reason. Not all of the virtues are necessarily compatible with all of the others, and a high degree of personal autonomy and an intensely self-sacrificial spirit seem rarely to be found in the same character. To put the same point a different way, Carrie would no longer be Carrie if the author of her story were to give her a Mollyan life plan.

Frey might respond to this claim by denying that Carrie's character is so limited; he might even say that he knows a servant like Carrie with Molly's self-assertiveness. I would not believe him and would ask him to show us that person. "Showing" here means composing a coherent, realistic narrative about a dependent-Carrie who exercises Molly-like control. I would not deny that there is a possible world in which the Molly/Carrie in question might exist, and I can
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imagine a science fiction writer constructing a character who is simultaneously in control and out of control, other-directed and self-sacrificial while also self-directed and self-interested. My point is not that the alleged character “Molly/Carrie” violates all laws of logic; it is that she violates our laws of psychology. I cannot envision Carrie as a character in a realistic novel exhibiting Molly’s self-assertive individualism. Why? Because the literary demands of similitude require a considerable amount of consistency. In order to present Molly/Carrie convincingly, an author would at some point have to have Carrie sacrifice the beliefs, practices, and values most dear to her. The result would be a Molly/Carrie who was no longer Carrie.

There are psychological limits to the virtues, and not all of the virtues are compatible with all of the others. Experience suggests to me that among normal adult humans—I shall have to be permitted to exclude Mother Teresa from my universalization—a high degree of autonomy is almost never found in combination with a high degree of solicitude for others. If Frey were arguing that autonomy was necessary for sainthood, I would be inclined to agree with him. In the saints, we find that rare combination of autonomy and care, but it is precisely the extraordinariness of this combination that makes such people saints. Normal adult humans like us have more difficulty putting lots of autonomy together with lots of care for others. Frey argues that autonomy is necessary for normal adult humanhood. Carrie is a counterexample. So even if we do not dismiss Frey’s second imagined response as granting the point at issue, it still fails. Carrie’s moral life would not necessarily be of a higher quality if she were to become autonomous.

There is a third response open to Frey; he could deny that Carrie is not autonomous. If we dig deep enough in her story, he might say, we shall see that she really has a free will and that her desires are not determined by irresistible forces of nature or socialization. Such an argument might go as follows. Carrie has her own ideas about what the good life is for her, and she is pursuing them. She is as free as the autonomous saint who obeys God’s voice because she wants to obey God’s voice. Carrie may not have been autonomous in her choice of workplaces, but she is autonomous in the choice of a self-sacrificial way of life.

This response is a strong one, but its ultimate failure may be seen by considering the following conversation in which the philosopher tries to expose Carrie’s allegedly hidden autonomy.

Frey: “Even though you say you are nonautonomous because you did not choose your secretarial job, you did choose to go to work, and in this you demonstrated your autonomy.”

Carrie: “I did not choose to go to work outside the home; I had to work to make ends meet.”

Frey: “Well, you chose that, to go to work to make ends meet, and you did it because you love your family, no?”

Carrie: “In a sense I chose it. But that choice was influenced as much by my husband’s (unspoken) wish that I go to work and by my own perception of my family’s needs as it was by my own interests. In fact, when I think about it, I probably would not have chosen to work had I not been very subtly coerced. So I guess I should say, no, that I did not choose to work.”

Frey: “But do you agree that you love your family, and that you would choose to satisfy their needs and your husband’s desires above all else?”

Carrie: “Yes.”

Frey: “Then when you make choices that pursue these goals you demonstrate your autonomy.”

Carrie: “That sounds convincing. But isn’t autonomy the control of lower order desires by higher order reflection?”

Frey: “Yes.”

Carrie: “Then am I really autonomous when I ‘decide’ to do what I perceive my husband wants me to do and what I feel my family wants me to do? Isn’t this more like ‘acting under the influence of forces outside’ myself than ‘acting so as to make something for myself’ of myself?”

Frey: “Do you think it is?”

Carrie: “Yes, I do. For religious reasons, I would rather be subject to these others’ desires than to pursue my own self-interested ends independently of them. But even this way of speaking is foreign to me.”

Frey: “Why?”

Carrie: “It is not very flattering to me, and it is not the way I would put things.”

Frey: “How would you put them?”

Carrie: “I would not put them in a way that suggested that I once faced a stark choice between (a) acting to please my husband and family and (b) acting to please myself. Nor would I say that I deliberated about those two potential life plans and then settled on (a). That is a false picture. I never faced the choice, nor made such a decision.”

Frey: “Really? Why?”
Carrie: "Because I am naturally a person who acts on (a) without thinking much about the possibility of (b)."

Frey: "You are ‘naturally’ such a person? Where did you get this nature?"

Carrie: "I am naturally such a person. I got my nature from my conservative rural upbringing, from my Bleeding Heart of Jesus Catholic tradition, from my parents, from my religious subculture."

The dialogue gives us insight into a particular nonautonomous character, and adds lustre and depth to a discussion that has been pale and abstract. It shows that someone can be not only good and nonautonomous but also intelligent and nonautonomous. Nonautonomous? Certainly. Carrie no more chose her caring servant-like conception of the good life than she chose her parents.

No matter how deeply we dig beneath the layers of influence, no matter how far we go in trying to strip away the “outer” layers, we will not find a hidden autonomous self who somewhere sometime seized control of her life. That self-standing individual is not there.26 Both of these descriptions are true:

1. Carrie is good (that is, she lives a highly textured moral life), and
2. Carrie is nonautonomous (that is, she does not have control over her desires).

Because 2 is true, Carrie falls outside the line Frey has drawn. That shows the moral irrelevance of the line, not of Carrie.27

Conclusion

I started with a fable about boys drawing lines on the beach; I hope its relevance to my argument is clear. Those of us who place overweening value on autonomy make a dangerous and costly mistake. For to suggest that the value of any being’s life is determined by how far that being falls from the middle of an arbitrary circle in the sand is to denigrate the lives of saintly folk like Carrie.28

I do not think that my point will be easy for everyone to see. It may be particularly difficult for those who have spent their lives talking to autonomous boys on one corner of the beach. But neither is crosscultural understanding impossible—even across very wide gaps—and to see my point we need only open our eyes, forget our prejudices, look intently at the foreign form of life, and fix our attention on particular individuals within it. Our ways of being moral may be incommensurable, but they are not impermeable.

The problem with Frey’s approach is that the moral life is so varied; no single standard should be relied upon to tell us what is normal and what is not. At best we must have a supple moral vocabulary, one equipped with a complex and diverse family of notions. Perhaps there are some lives utterly lacking in moral value, but just because they do not display autonomous control is not a good reason to begin wondering whether we may barbecue or bash them.29 Nor should we too readily ascribe universality to the central virtue of our circles. All too often this has the effect of stigmatizing other individuals and other circles as aberrant. This should no longer be acceptable, even if it is a long-established practice. Feminist, religious, and utopian communities in the West and East have ways other than Frey’s for ordering and evaluating life.30 They may be less aggressively individualistic or competitive or power-conscious; they may place a higher value on interdependence or compromise or self-sacrifice. They may attach less importance to one’s personal future and more importance to the collective past. But the mere fact that they do not value autonomy as highly as Frey and his boys do is no argument that they are therefore less admirable morally.

What Frey has left unsaid—what falls into the margins rather than the lines of his text—is the figure of his other, the background character out of whom Frey’s autonomous self has emerged. This other, the independent agent’s “mother,” as it were, is the servant, the patient, the one who is subject to forces beyond her control. Such forces are powerfully displayed in the birthing process required to bring every potentially autonomous person into the world. The mother often suffers as the child establishes the necessary distance from her. But for the child then to turn around and accuse the other of moral inferiority associated with “servility” and “weakness” is to be more than ungrateful. It is culpable misinterpretation, using a single standard—a son’s independence—to try to measure the value of a mother’s form of labor.31

What does Carrie have to do with animals? She is a vivid reminder of how different we humans are from each other, of how difficult it is to categorize our kite flying, castle building, ice cream eating carnival using
simple schemes like “in” and “out.” If our fluid relationships with each other do not yield to such simplistic categories, how much more ill-suited such categories must be for describing the complex web of our relations to animals.

Philosophers have long sought to find a single characteristic the possession of which would set us clearly above other animals. Previously we have tried to draw the line at the possession of a soul, or at sentience, or purposiveness, or desire, belief, linguistic competence, imagination, a concept of the self, rationality, a sense of the future, or possession of moral rights. All of these lines fail because we have such different ways of living good lives, as Carrie plainly shows. There is no reason to think we may kill and barbecue Carrie just because she lacks autonomy. Nor is there any reason to think we may kill and barbecue cows and pigs just because they lack autonomy.32

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Notes

1 Frey holds that if the possession of moral rights entitles one to membership in the moral circle then animals will have to be excluded, as will those humans he and we clumsily call “marginal.” Marginal humans who lack language, beliefs, and interests lack the equipment necessary for possessing the right to life. Severely handicapped newborns, very severely mentally enfeebled adults, those in persistent vegetative states, the irreversibly comatose: all will appear—with whales, cows, and pigs—on the wrong side of the line. By Frey’s reckoning, all of these beings lack the equipment necessary for the possession of moral rights: language, beliefs, and interests in the relevant sense. If they lack the necessary equipment they cannot have moral rights. It follows that in killing such beings we do not fail to respect their right to life.


3 The Monist 70 (January 1987): 49–63. See, too, the series of articles that he describes as forthcoming (and which I have not read) for which he gives the following bibliographical references: "Autonomy and Animals," in M. Daly, A. George, eds., Animals in Society: Rights and Wrongs; "Autonomy, Proxy Agency, and Valuable Lives," in Philosophica; and "Conceptions of the Good Life and the Value of a Life," in T. Attig, D. Callan, L. W. Sumner, eds., Values and Moral Standing. Frey has apparently spent enough energy trying to erase the line drawn by rights-based approaches to the treatment of animals. The phrase “moral rights” hardly appears in the recent article, having been replaced by talk about the “value of life,” while talk about the “interests” of beings has been replaced by discussions of their relative “autonomy.”


5 “Autonomy,” p. 50. It is worth noticing that the concept of moral rights is also central to the theories he identifies.

The Moral Irrelevance of Autonomy

7 Frey, p. 51.
8 “Autonomy,” p. 53.
9 “Autonomy,” p. 53.
10 “Autonomy,” p. 54.

11 Frey writes: “But I do not regard all human life as of equal value; I do not accept that a very severely mentally-enfeebled human or an elderly human fully in the grip of senile dementia or an infant born with only half a brain has a life whose value is equal to that of normal, adult humans. The quality of human life can plummet ... As the quality of human life falls, trade-offs between it and other things we value become possible ...” “Autonomy,” p. 58.

Two points should be made here. First, from the premise that the quality of some people’s moral lives is better than others it does not follow that the value of some people’s lives is greater than others. As Paul Taylor argues, beings with (what Taylor calls) “inherent moral worth” have it equally, even though the richness and texture of their lives differs. Second, in order to account for the fact that different kinds of beings live different kinds of lives and require different forms of respectful treatment from us it is not necessary to say that the lives of some of us are greater than those of others. The twenty year old Downs syndrome patient should be treated more paternalistically than the fully conscious autonomous philosopher, but the difference in treatment does not entail nor require the postulation of a difference in their respective inherent moral worth. Cf. Taylor’s Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

Ned Hettinger has patiently explained this point to me. The relevant distinction is between moral considerability or moral standing (which a being either has or does not have) and that of the moral quality of a being’s life (which comes in degrees and may be graded or ranked). Any being with moral considerability has it fully, even if his life is wasting away because of Alzheimer’s disease. Clearly, even on this hierarchical view of better and worse moral lives, a being’s being located at the bottom of the scale is in itself no reason to think that that being may be disrespectfully treated, much less killed, eaten, deprived of a family life, or had chemicals poured in its eyes.

12 How many people in the world are like Carrie? I am currently reading two realistic novels, Louise Erdrich’s The Beet Queen (New York: Henry Holt, 1986), and Iris Murdoch’s The Philosopher’s Pupil (New York: Viking, 1983). Out of a total of roughly twenty major characters in these two contemporary works, I would call all twenty “normal adult humans,” roughly fifteen of them morally admirable people, but only five of them autonomous in Frey’s sense. This seems a representative assessment of my nonfictional acquaintances as well. If the novels are at all representative then, roughly twenty-five percent of all people are morally good, but only a third of those exercise Frey’s “autonomy as control.” If there are five billion people in the world, this would mean that some two billion are nonautonomous and lead lives of a high moral quality.

13 In “The Value of Autonomy,” The Philosophical Quarterly 32 (January 1982): 35-44, Robert Young raises the question of whether autonomy is always a virtue. The major problem Young sees is that of the tyrant who uses his or her autonomy to devise evil schemes. As will become clear, this is not my primary objection to the concept. Young touches on my concern, however, in his conclusion: “... what I have said ... does not imply that the exercise of an individual’s autonomy may not at the same time introduce more disvalue than the value that resides in that autonomy” (p. 44).

14 “Autonomy,” p. 57.
15 “Autonomy,” p. 57.


20 Carrie regards the deliberate pursuit of her own ends independently of the needs and ends of others as something she ought not to do. Perhaps this is because she believes that such self-interested reflection is sin. Perhaps she thinks that it will distract her energies from her children (with whom she deeply identifies herself). Perhaps she believes as the British novelist Charles Williams did, that some people have the gift and responsibility of carrying psychological and spiritual burdens for others. Perhaps Carrie believes as Williams and Saint Paul did, that her life is not her own to control. “He and we co-inhere,” Williams wrote, and the New Testament puts it even more mysteriously: “I live: yet not I but Christ liveth in me.” Whatever the explanation, Carrie’s hesitation to pursue her own independence is not unprecedented. For a philosophical defense of Williams’ doctrine of Co-Inherence,

21 "Personal Autonomy and the Paradox of Feminine Socialization," *The Journal of Philosophy* 84 (November 1987): 619-628. Meyers points out that "feminists are justifiably suspicious of the professed fulfillment of many traditional women. Since traditional women do not use autonomy skills adeptly, there is no reason to believe that they are doing what they really want to do" (p. 628). To her credit, Meyers goes on to point out that "Conversely, however, if an adult who has been raised to assume the tasks of housekeeping and parenting embraces this role, feminists would have no grounds for complaint provided that the individual is skilled in autonomy competency" (p. 628).

Meyers is too enamored of autonomy. As Kathryn Pyne Addelson points out in a response to the article, Meyers' liberal approach to the lives of traditional women does not, in the end, "respect the worlds and lives of many men, women, and children, and they leave many of our own secular, white, professional biases unexamined. . . . The fundamentalist mother is faulted for accepting creationism uncritically, but we do not ask about the schoolteachers' acceptance of Darwin—evolutionary theory is true, is it not?" Addelson concludes that "in one form or another, the specter of elitism re-emerges" in Meyers' feminism. I agree. "Autonomy and Respect," *The Journal of Philosophy* 84 (November 1987): 629.

22 In what follows, I am drawing on some ideas of Harry Frankfurt's, and a suggestion of Phil Quinn's.


24 Meyers, p. 621.

25 Nietzsche held that *every* person who fills the role of a servant is necessarily self-deceived and pitiable. I have tried to suggest why this judgment does not apply to Carrie. She has lived her life tending to the needs and desires and well-being of others: of her children, her husband, her employers, her brothers and sisters, their children, her neighbors, but she has not done so in an unreflective or grudging way. She has not "taken control" of her life or asserted her right to pursue her own ends "free of the coercive interference of others," but she is aware that she could do so. She flourishes with a conception of the good life she inherited.

26 The language itself requires us to postulate what is not there; Descartes' unified subject reading life-options from a menu and choosing number 23 over number 11. As feminists from Carol Gilligan to Marilyn Friedman have argued, the paradigm is too individualistic to capture the most important elements of many women's (and men's!) moral experiences. Cf. Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), and Friedman's "Autonomy and the Split-Level Self," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986): 19-35.

27 Frey could also argue that Carrie's heteronomous life—showing care for the needs of others at the potential cost of her own independence—is irrational. I cannot here do justice to this objection, but it is worth pointing out in passing that a number of very rational people have recently come to the defense of at least one nonautonomous form of ethics, the Divine Command theory. If we assume that philosophers who write in mainstream analytic philosophy journals are not likely to propose irrational ideas, then the recent proliferation of philosophical defenses of this theological ethic provides us with some reason not to think that "ethics" is impossible without autonomy as a central pillar. See, for example, Philip L. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); Robert Merrihew Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," in Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., eds., *Religion and Morality* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1973); and "Autonomy and Theological Ethics," and "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," both reprinted in Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford, 1987), pp. 123-127 and 128-143; Baruch A. Brody, "Morality and Religion Reconsidered," in Brody, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: An Analytic Approach* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974): 592-603; Janine Marie Idziak, "In Search of 'Good Positive Reasons' for an Ethics of Divine Commands: A Catalogue of Arguments," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (January 1989): 47-64.

28 Since moral circles and the standards of judging the good internal to them are various, it is best to accord each human being the same kind of inherent value we attribute to ourselves. This is the central insight of Frey's utilitarian tradition, that each counts for one and only for one. Because we lack a consensus on how to measure the richness of moral life, we ought not to make the quality of moral life the basis for deciding how to treat one another. We ought to act as if each of us possessed equal value, respecting others as if they were ends and never means unless we have good reasons for thinking that something is not an end.

29 Further, making such a judgment is so momentous that we probably should not even tempt ourselves with it unless forced to do so. As Alan Donagan points out in *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), the capacity of western industrialized nations to support even the most vulnerable of humans is great. Until we are so poor and resourceless that we must begin killing some humans we ought not to worry about drawing lines.
Where did the idea get started that autonomy is a moral idea which all rational persons ought to pursue and a constitutive feature of normal adult human life? Perhaps it was on an island, where controlling the boats that arrived on and departed from one's shores was essential for survival. If exercising control over one's watery boundaries means the difference between life and death, then control will become an important feature of that form of life. It is also likely that certain habits will be encouraged, habits like disciplining one's thoughts and emotions, pursuing one's interests, deliberately formulating a plan of life, and sticking to it. But "control" may come at the cost of other habits, such as "release," including the capacity to express emotion, sacrifice one's own desires, put the physical and spiritual needs of the vulnerable above one's own. Informal observation of the world tells me that the first set of traits is typically found in certain individuals (e.g., male Anglophile academics), and not in others (e.g., female conservative Christians), and more commonly found in certain communities (e.g., secular institutions of higher learning in western Europe and North America), and not in others (e.g., loosely-knit networks of Iranian women friends). This is not surprising, of course. The first set of virtues are those conducive to the sustenance of certain forms of life, and the second set are those conducive to the sustenance of other forms of life. We should not fault one for not being the other.

It is also to employ the sort of gendered language feminists have taught us to recognize as rhetorical in the worst sense. It is the worst because it sounds benign even as it carries powerful political import. Its use has long been the most subtle and effective tool with which one group (often composed primarily but not exclusively of men) has, willingly or unwittingly, marginalized the moral experiences and languages of other groups (often composed largely but not exclusively of women). To continue to pursue such ways of speaking is not profitable for those of us trying to listen "with a different ear" to "the different voices" not only of women but also of all those historically excluded from the moral philosophers' games. I take the phrases from Gilligan and Claudia Card, the latter of whom has written that "it is important to listen to women with a different ear, not simply to listen for a different voice in women." Card, "Women's Voices," p. 134.

In addition to the commentators whose responses follow, I have profited from the criticisms of Ned Hettinger, Peter List, Phil Quinn, Richard Noland, and Harry Frankfurt. I discussed the paper with colleagues in the Philosophy Departments at Oregon State University and Western Illinois University; read it at the Society for the Study of Ethics and Animals at the 1990 Pacific Division Meeting; and read it again at a conference on animal rights at San Francisco State University in April, 1990.
treatment of humans and nonhumans short of showing they have different moral statuses. Suppose, for example, that someone wants to defend a preference for using nonhuman animals for risky, nontherapeutic medical research, under circumstances in which research subjects are necessary for the discovery of scientific knowledge that is likely to reduce human mortality or morbidity, utilization of research subjects is limited, and pain and risks to subjects are minimized consistent with scientific requirements. This preference might be defended on utilitarian grounds. Or it might be defended on the ground that there are different and stronger objections to the killing of humans than there are to the killing of nonhumans. Relations among humans, rights, and even autonomy might be the basis for such objections. Whatever we think of these arguments, rejecting a bright line drawn in terms of autonomy doesn’t answer the human chauvinist who has more limited reasons for his humanoid preferences.

On Comstock’s account, autonomy requires self-determination on three fronts. (Comstock says his account is based on Frey’s, and I’ll let Frey speak for himself about whether it is his.) Autonomy requires, first, acting on our own behalf, that is, self-reliance; second, ordering our own preferences, that is, self-control; and third, deciding on our own about the kind of life we want to lead, i.e., self-determination. There is ambiguity in Comstock’s presentation of these elements of autonomy, particularly with respect to how individualistic and how radical they are.

Comstock describes the requirement of self-reliance variously, as “the freedom to act on our own behalf,” “our desire to achieve things for ourselves,” “rely[ing] on [our] own talents and powers,” “not [being] subject to control by paternalistic outside forces,” and being “free of the coercive influence of others.” The example he gives of this requirement is a woman who refuses to let her husband write the papers necessary for her to get tenure. Because of this example, and because Comstock’s third element focuses on external influences on choice, I take this first requirement of autonomy to be about standing on one’s own feet, being independent and self-reliant. The woman who lets her husband establish her credentials is an extreme case; she is fraudulently claiming credit for someone else’s work and not achieving what she ought to achieve on her own. But Comstock’s descriptions suggest that he has a broader range of self-reliance in mind for autonomy. How much broader, however, is difficult to determine. Do I lack autonomy if I hire (and properly credit) a research assistant? If I join with others to develop a team-taught course in which we reciprocally rely on each other’s contributions? Comstock describes an open-ended linkage between autonomy and self-reliance, under which it is unclear whether such appropriate forms of interdependence and cooperation might violate autonomy.

Internal self-control is the second element of autonomy as described by Comstock. He refers to this element as “making higher order decisions about the relative importance of lower order desires,” “devot[ing ourselves] to the desires [we] desire most,” and as “forego[ing] certain lower order preferences.” There is a clear confusion here between structure and substance. The regulative principle that we should order our desires to allow coherent action toward what we most want is not the same as the substantive requirement that we should forego lesser pleasures such as recreation in the service of higher values of achievement such as academic promotion. Comstock’s choice of career achievement as a clear example of a higher order preference once again suggests an apparent identification of autonomy with individualistic values.

Comstock’s final element of autonomy is self-determination in the sense of choosing for ourselves who we want to be. Sometimes Comstock suggests this means being free altogether of background influences, such as family traditions. At other points he suggests it means only deliberately selecting our own life from a menu of conceptions of the good life. Comstock’s example of failed self-determination is the man who stays with the family business rather than becoming a painter, a choice described as letting others impose their conceptions of the good life on him. But bowing to his father’s dictates is only one explanation of such a choice, the explanation that would involve a clear loss of self-determination. Other explanations of the choice, such as concern for his father or desire to carry on the family tradition, stem from nonindividualistic values that may not indicate a loss of self-determination.

Now why is Carrie deficient in autonomy? She muddles through life, in a motherly way, thinking she might like to do something else. Here are some deficiencies listed by Comstock:

1. She has not deliberately chosen a life plan.
2. The causal explanation for what she does—mothering—is largely her upbringing.
3. What she does involves the fulfillment of "lower order" desires, motherhood and nurturance, rather than a "career" (I put "career" in quotes because the implication that motherhood is not a "career" is Comstock's, not mine).

4. She allows herself to pursue cooperative strategies and takes interest in others' needs rather than her own self-interest.

5. She does not pursue what she thinks she would like to do most, be a hospital volunteer or a nurse.

The last three of these focus largely on Carrie's failure to pursue her own self-interest. That she seeks motherhood rather than a "career," puts others' interests before her own preferences, and continues her current job rather than volunteering in a hospital, go to the content of what she has chosen rather than to the structure of her choosing. The first two deficiencies—her failure to choose a life plan and the fact that her upbringing largely explains her life—come closer to the core notion of autonomy as freedom of choice. But even here, what Comstock says links autonomy to a rejection of background and tradition that is far too strong.

To see this, consider some other possible deficiencies in Carrie as a chooser, that Comstock does not mention:

6. Carrie lacks important knowledge about the courses of life available to her. She apparently has little experience of what nursing is actually like and whether she would enjoy it. She believes, falsely, that her family would oppose a change, so she perceives herself as hemmed in, when she is not.

7. She is paid the wages of a secretary rather than an administrative assistant, and she accepts this exploitation uncomplainingly, without apparently even recognizing it.

8. She is vaguely dissatisfied with her life, casting out for something different but not knowing how to go about finding it.

These do suggest defects in Carrie as a chooser: lack of knowledge, a failure to value her own contributions, and the vague sense that whatever it is that she wants, she is not getting it. To be sure, the search for fuller knowledge and a more secure sense of her own value might well be at odds with the person Carrie now is. She does not think in these ways, and if she did, she might reexamine her background and change some of what she values. On the other hand, a fuller sense of her own value and possibilities might resolve some of Carrie's current dissatisfaction and place her current virtues, her nurturance and caring, on a more secure footing in her life. There are risks to autonomy, but Comstock is wrong to see these risks as principally the risks of selfishness.

Finally, suppose we grant that a more autonomous Carrie would have lost something of value. It does not follow that autonomy is irrelevant to how others should treat her. Even if she does not recognize her own worth and demand more, she is wronged by someone who pays her too little. Carrie is in a classic double bind situation diagnosed by feminists: hurt if she risks changes, yet diminished even in her own eyes if she does not. Respecting her autonomy in this context raises complex and important issues. Participants in the debate over how to treat both humans and nonhumans, in many different contexts, would do better to focus on the characteristics of creatures and their situations that matter morally, and why and how these characteristics matter, rather than bright lines or irrelevance.
Response: Autonomy as an Excuse for All-Too-Human Chauvinism

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In debating the question of animal liberation it has been my experience, if I may paraphrase Frey, that most people feel that (normal) human life is of a much higher quality than animal life and that since the value of life is a function of its quality, animal life does not have the same value as (normal) human life. Indeed, most people feel that we are something of a special or a privileged class against which the lives of others are viewed and their value assessed. It is not surprising that we feel this way. As Donald Griffin has pointed out, “it seems plausible that animals would be more likely to survive and reproduce if their beliefs included confident faith in their own superiority and the assurance that exploiting other species was normal and correct behavior.” Historically, religion, literature, and philosophy have been extensively engaged in reinforcing this instinctual faith in the pre-eminent worth and privilege of humanity. It has been their task to find and warmly extol those things which distinguish us from those “mere animals” we want to drive off the land, kill, eat, wear, and otherwise exploit and destroy to fulfill our needs and wants. It has been their job to keep our consciences clear as we bestride the world, using our overwhelming might to take control, mold the world to satisfy our idea of the good life, and kill off those who stand in our way. Self-fulfillment, accomplishing our plans, achieving our purposes—again to use Frey’s language and emphasis—that is what we want, and many philosophers have bravely stepped forward to reassure us that since the quality and value of (normal) human life are “incomparably beyond” those of any mere animal, “the way is open” for us to kill these inferior life forms as we need and want to in pursuit of the wonderfully “rich, full life” of a (normal) human being.

Autonomy is something we humans have frequently felt we were unique in possessing, and our philosophers have repeatedly reminded us how pre-eminently worthy being autonomous makes us. According to Frey, autonomy gives a “further dimension of value to our lives” by adding the happiness of a “strong sense of achievement” to what would otherwise be a “mere record of the satisfaction of first-order desires and appetites.” Frey thus gives a hedonistic reason for believing that autonomous beings are more valuable than nonautonomous beings. One could also (or alternatively) offer deontological and altruistic reasons for that evaluation: Kantians claim that only autonomous agents are capable of recognizing and acting out of respect for the moral law, and utilitarians could argue that only autonomous agents are capable of escaping the repetitious cycles of nature to improve the general welfare. Such reasons raise a myriad of questions, including the one with which Professor Comstock has dealt: Does autonomy, as Frey has characterized it, have the “crucial moral significance” he attributes to it? I have three contributions I would like to make to that line of questioning.

First, Bentham noted seven dimensions of hedonistic values: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent. Like John Stuart Mill, in chapter II of Utilitarianism, Frey wants to add an eighth dimension, quality, to this list. However, he does not—in his writings with which I am familiar—explain how this eighth dimension relates to the other seven. Would he have it, as Mill did, that the accomplishment of even one little reflective project is preferable to even the greatest fulfillment of unreflective desires and appetites? For example, would Frey maintain that the sense of achievement at completing one’s plans to clean out the rain gutters is preferable to any amount of pleasure from sex, fine wine, good food, or other sensual sources? If so, he has a heavy burden of justification to shoulder in order to render such an incredible conclusion credible. But if not, then there may be autonomous lives that are not as valuable as nonautonomous lives filled with...
especially some Anglo-American moral philosophers. Thus, Frey must either embrace some incredible comparisons or concede that a sense of achievement need not make a life something of immensely greater value than a life of satisfied desires and appetites.

Second, dedicated empiricist that he was, Mill held that the only way to tell whether X is qualitatively superior to Y is to ask someone who has experienced both which she prefers. But no one can experience both an autonomous and a nonautonomous life. Consequently, unless a credible, nonexperiential way of assessing the quality of life can be found, the question of whether an autonomous or nonautonomous life is of greater quality and value is unanswerable and, many would conclude, therefore cognitively meaningless.

Sometimes the meaninglessness of comparing the quality of autonomous and nonautonomous lives goes unrecognized because a nonautonomous life, i.e., the life of a being lacking the capacity for autonomy, is confused with a life in which a being capable of autonomy is not able to actualize that potentiality. For instance, a person who spends part of her life dominated by strong-willed parents but who eventually goes on to hold her own values and way of life may report that she prefers the latter, self-determined way of life. And this may be cited as evidence that an autonomous life is preferable to a nonautonomous life. But that would be a category mistake: In discussions of human vs. nonhuman lives, the contrast between autonomy and nonautonomy refers to differing capacities, whereas the alternatives in the case of the liberated woman refer to different actualizations of the same capacities. Therefore, what a human being can report on, namely, the undesirability of a life in which her capacities for autonomy go unfulfilled, is irrelevant to determining whether an autonomous, human life is preferable to a nonautonomous, animal life, since the latter is a life led by a being who is incapable of autonomy and, consequently, can have all his capabilities fulfilled in a nonautonomous life.

Let me pursue this crucial point a bit further, with an eye to the origin of values. When something is said to have value, it is always meaningful to ask, “For whom?” So, for whom is the value of an autonomous life greater than that of a nonautonomous life? Frey's answer is, apparently, for some moral philosophers, especially some Anglo-American moral philosophers. Now, this evaluation, if arrived at reflectively at all, must have been arrived at by these people either (1) imagining how it would feel to live the life of a dog, a chicken, or some other nonautonomous being (the dog and chicken are Frey's candidates for nonautonomy) or (2) contemplating these nonautonomous lives the way one would a tree, painting, or other object and noting the properties those lives have when thus externally examined.

If the evaluation is based on how these philosophers imagine they would feel if they had to live a dog's life, then these philosophers are employing their imaginations to commit the same sort of category mistake discussed above. The image one has here is that of a prisoner, a consciousness which is capable of doing a variety of things confined to a way of life which does not permit her to actualize those capacities, although she remains aware of these capacities and feels frustrated by the lack of opportunity to actualize them. However touching, this image has nothing to do with the actual, lived quality and value of the life of a dog. The actual, lived quality and value of a way of life must (logically) be the quality and value that way of life was for the individual actually living it. Consequently, if we hold, as seems reasonable, that the quality and value of a way of life depend on how it fulfills or frustrates capabilities, we must remember that the relevant capabilities are those of the individual actually living the life. For example, it is how a dog's way of life actually fulfills or frustrates the dog's capacities, not how it would fulfill or frustrate the capacities of some Anglo-American philosopher, that contributes to its actual, lived quality and value.

It follows that to determine whether a human life actually has higher lived quality and value than a dog's, one must compare the quality and value the human life has for its human subject with the quality and value the dog's life has for its canine subject. Colloquially, in order to determine whether the happiness of a happy human life is of a quality superior to the happiness of a happy canine life, we would need to compare the happiness our way of life provides us with the happiness the dog's way of life provides the dog. In order to make that comparison, we would have to feel the happiness the dog derives from his life and compare that with the happiness we derive from ours. Since we are not dogs, we cannot do that. Although we can tell, from his behavior, that a dog is happy, we cannot feel the happiness of a happy dog and, consequently, cannot compare its quality to that of the happiness we
experience. For example, since we cannot feel the dog’s
calm at running along the beach, we cannot
compare the quality of his happiness to the quality of our
sense of fulfillment at solving a tricky logic problem
and determine which is the qualitatively superior
happiness. Consequently, we cannot tell whether a
fulfilling life for a dog is qualitatively less happy than
a fulfilling life for a human. Thus, assertions that a
human life possesses superior actual, lived quality and
value must (logically) be merely confused, rhetorical
flourishes, devoid of cognitive content.8

But it may not be actual, lived quality and value
that Frey and his fellow anthropophiles have in mind.
When they assert that autonomous life has a higher
quality and value than nonautonomous life, they may
mean merely that it has a preponderance of the qualities
they prefer. The situation would be like that of someone
who holds that the music of Beethoven is qualitatively
superior to that of the Beatles: the valuer has certain
qualities he prefers in music, and he finds more of them
in Fidelio than in The Yellow Submarine. On this
interpretation, when Frey’s Anglo-American philosophers
hold that autonomous life is qualitatively superior to nonautonomous life, this is to be understood
as asserting that these philosophers have certain
qualities they prefer in a way of life, and they find
more of them in autonomous than in nonautonomous
ways of life.

Now, we philosophers have long believed that we are
“the measure of all things,” smugly certain that “the
unexamined life is not worth living” and that Socrates
and his acolytes through the centuries have most closely
approached the ideal human life and, consequently, the
ideal of all life. Nevertheless, the conceit of holding that
“the way is open” to killing others because their way of
life does not possess the qualities preferred by a group of
moral (!) philosophers is particularly appalling. As
Comstock has shown, and Christ, Rousseau, Kierkegaard,
Faulkner, and many others confirm, Frey’s preferences
are not shared by all normal, adult humans, nor even by
all humans who have reflected sensitively on the human
condition. They are doubtless not shared by nonauton-
omous beings. Given this diversity of preferences, it
would seem incumbent on Frey—especially since he
wants to make the qualities he prefers into life-or-death
criteria—to demonstrate that his preferences are the
“true,” “basic,” “superior,” or otherwise definitive criteria
for evaluating the quality and value of life. I am not
aware that he has even attempted to do this.

Based on the discussions of moral relativism I have
published elsewhere,9 I would argue that such a
demonstration cannot be provided. Since values depend
on valuers for their existence and since valuers are so
diverse, there is no nonarbitrary way of showing that
what one group of valuers prefers in life provides the
“true,” “basic,” “superior,” or otherwise definitive
evaluation of lives. Nonarbitrary comparisons of the
quality and value of ways of life are limited to evaluating
alternative ways of life for the same (sort of) subject,
as when we determine that life in a battery cage is less
fulfilling for chickens than a free-roaming life or that
spontaneous, intuitive lives are less fulfilling for Anglo-
American philosophers than are self-controlled,
reflective lives.

Finally, at one point Frey does go beyond warmly
reciting his preferences to offering us one reason why
autonomy is of “crucial moral significance in killing:”
An autonomous being is “able to see itself as existing
over time, able to have desires with respect to the
future, including the desire to go on living, and able,
therefore, to have these desires frustrated.”10

Apparently, Frey intends “crucial moral significance”
here to mean something like “necessary condition for
making killing morally significant,” since he
concludes that “the way is open” to killing those who
lack the ability to have such desires and to experience
such frustration.

Since I have refuted this sort of contention at length
elsewhere,11 let me here just quickly mention one
serious, logical problem with it. The difficulty is that
even if frustrating plans for the future and a desire to
live are morally significant matters, it does not follow
that depriving a nonautonomous being of the rest of its
life, thereby depriving it of any chance at further
happiness, is not also a morally significant matter.
Therefore, it does not follow that “the way is open”
to killing nonautonomous beings.

This may be overlooked, since using the word
“frustrated” suggests that killing autonomous beings is
morally crucial because they experience feelings of
frustration at having the fulfillment of their desires
blocked by being killed. Nonautonomous beings,
supposedly lacking plans for the future, could not
experience such feelings of frustration at being killed.
However, such an analysis of the moral significance of
killing would open the way to killing autonomous
beings in ways which do not cause them feelings of
frustration, e.g., killing them in their sleep. Since that

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is, presumably, an unacceptable conclusion, the moral significance of killing autonomous beings must lie in the blocking of the fulfillment of their desires, whether or not they realize those desires are being blocked. This suggests that there is not a morally crucial difference between killing a being with desires for the future and killing a being lacking such desires.

In conclusion, I would like to comment on the idea that because there is a "further dimension of value to our lives," the way is open to the killing of animals. It is not obvious that A's being superior to B entitles A to kill or otherwise exploit B. The teachings of Christ and the extra burdens placed on the philosopher-kings of Plato's Republic suggest the contrary. Consequently, "firmly resisting any egalitarianism over the value of life" should (logically) not be confused with opening the way to killing or otherwise exploiting animals. Justifying that opening requires not only demonstrating superiority, which Frey has tried but failed to do; it also requires demonstrating that superiority provides a license to exploit and kill, which Frey has had the good sense not even to try to do.

Notes


3 Frey, pp. 51, 54.

4 Frey, p. 56.

5 Frey, p. 51.

6 Jeremy Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, chapter IV.

7 Frey, p. 54.

8 The same conclusion holds, for the same reason, concerning assertions that a happy human life will be quantitatively superior to a happy canine life.


10 Frey, p. 51.


12 Frey, p. 56.

13 Frey, p. 56.
Response: “Autonomy and the Moral Status of Animals”

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Autonomy has been one of the most crucial concepts in moral philosophy since the Enlightenment; it has been equally important in the forms of moral practice that have developed during that time, in particular, in the drive for more democratic social structures. And its importance hasn't flagged, in either theory or practice, in our culture's most recent reflections about the nature and demands of ethics. But at the same time it is a highly contentious concept, both in terms of how it should be understood, and of its implications for how we ought to live our lives. In these remarks I will establish a context designed to underscore both the continuing significance and the continuing controversy surrounding autonomy.

The Idea of Autonomy: A Rough Characterization

A “smooth” characterization of autonomy would require a great deal of space to work out and defend, and would still be subject to disagreement. But the conceptual neighborhood autonomy occupies can be indicated fairly succinctly: Autonomy involves the notion of being free to choose one's own values and actions. This is a familiar idea, and one whose moral importance is fairly apparent, at least in our time and place: We feel the loss of something very important if we are deprived of our liberty. If our choices or actions are manipulated by the force or the deception of others, we tend to feel as though our importance as persons is too cheaply regarded.

DISCUSSION

If the idea of autonomy is readily accessible, some of its complexities lie pretty close to the surface as well: Even without blatant force or fraud, how free are we really to choose and act on those choices? What is the bearing of our environment and our genetic heritage on what we wish and what we do? Can such influences be resisted? To what extent is the viability of autonomy as a moral notion dependent on human life's not being determined by causal regularities?

Most moral examinations of autonomy proceed as though there were satisfactory answers to these questions in place, and to a large extent, this is true of this symposium as well. It is more directly to the present point to sketch out the lines of another dispute: How and why is autonomy morally significant at all?

The Significance of Autonomy: Views from Moral Theory

There are two major positions on this issue. Some thinkers regard autonomy as morally significant intrinsically. The most uncompromising proponent of this view historically is probably Immanuel Kant, who regarded the possession of autonomy as essential for having any moral standing at all; once possessed it has an overriding impact on the ways that one should be treated. As Kant would have it, an autonomous being is a person, and persons ought never be treated solely as means to ends but always as “ends in themselves.” Kant saw any being or action that was not autonomous, but simply a part of the closed, causally determined system of Nature, as without moral worth. Nonhuman animals, therefore, are without any direct moral standing for Kant, although we do need to take care about how our treatment of animals might influence our behavior toward other persons. Contemporary philosophers influenced by Kant do not necessarily follow him in denying any moral standing to nonautonomous beings or actions, but they tend to agree that autonomy is crucial to the possession of moral rights.

The tradition in moral theory more heavily indebted to John Stuart Mill—utilitarianism—regards autonomy as important not in itself, but because of its important contributions to what is important in itself. If, for instance, one takes happiness to be the only things that is an intrinsic good, then autonomy is morally important just to the extent that honoring it leads to greater happiness. Mill and others have argued that respecting the autonomy of human beings is strongly conducive
to happiness, for an adult can be generally presumed to know her own interests better than others will, and because, as noted earlier, being coerced by others, even if their motivation is benevolent, typically makes us very unhappy.

It is worth noting that because this tradition in moral theory sees traits other than autonomy as ethically important, it is often more hospitable to nonhuman animals (on the widely shared assumption that the relevant senses of autonomy do not apply to nonhumans).

Both broad concepts of autonomy have been influential in recent movements of moral reform, with interesting results for both our moral practice, and our moral understanding.

The Significance of Autonomy: Views from Contemporary Social Movements

The idea of autonomy has played a major role in many of the social practices that have recently undergone rapid and significant change. Three social movements—patients' rights, the women's movement, and the movement to liberate animals—are particularly instructive.

In health care, both legal and moral theory, followed (to some extent) by clinical practice, have moved decisively away from the paternalistic idea that "doctor knows best" about the kind of health care decisions that ought to be made for a patient, and toward the notion that the free and informed consent of patients is a basic requisite for acceptable medical interactions. A parallel shift seems to lie at the heart of the women's movement; it has rejected the idea that women's lives and choices should be determined by a patriarchal system that subordinates their interests to those of men. Similarly, many animal liberationists have insisted that we abandon the notion that animals are simply there for our use, even if we avoid cruelty in our dealings with them. Animals have lives of their own, on this view, and aren't just means to our ends.

All this is clearly a movement in the direction of greater respect for the autonomy of patients, of women, and of nonhumans. But while appeal to the moral importance of respecting autonomy has figured importantly in these and other movements for moral change, all three have yielded problems and insights that have made the concept of autonomy seem even more complex and problematic.

A good deal of contemporary health care, for example, is directed toward the no-longer autonomous, the not-yet autonomous, those who will never be autonomous, and those of diminished autonomy. Many medical ethicists maintain that an autonomous person's "moral advantage, is restricted to her being (in general) an authoritative source of information concerning her values, and hence, an authoritative decision-maker. Those who lack autonomy cannot occupy that role, but there is an equal moral obligation to tailor treatment decisions to the patient's values, not those of her caregivers; the trick, of course, is to determine what those values are.

Many feminist theorists have in recent years expressed real concern about the logical, causal, and metaphorical implications of autonomy, or at least of certain understandings of the notion. They are suspicious that an ethic centered on autonomy presents a too highly individualized picture of moral relationships—at least, too highly individualized to accurately represent the moral situations characteristic of women—and that a focus on autonomy tends to discourage taking proper moral account of the value of concern and connectedness, of compassion and care.

And finally, the animal liberation movement has contributed to reconsiderations of both autonomy's range and its importance. It has explored the implications of the fact that nonhumans have strong preferences and can make choices reflecting them. Also, along with feminist theorists and medical ethicists, philosophers interested in animals have suggested that autonomy may need to be taken down a peg or two as a determinant of moral standing.

It is this second theme that Professor Comstock explores in his paper. Fixing on a particular analysis of autonomy—that provided by R. G. Frey—he attempts to demonstrate that a human life may fail to be autonomous in that sense, yet be worthy of moral respect and protection. He suggests further that some of the moral qualities we respect in his exemplar, a woman named Carrie, may be due to her very lack of autonomy, as Frey conceives of it. The implication of Professor Comstock's paper is clear: If a human being doesn't possess autonomy for her life to be considered with moral respect, there is no justification for regarding autonomy as the secular analog to the traditional notion of an immortal soul—the "bright line" separating humans from nonhumans that allows us to manipulate and end animal lives with impunity.

Professor Francis' commentary raises questions about whether Comstock's understanding of autonomy
is overly individualistic, linking the notion too closely to “a rejection of background and tradition.” She also suggests that Carrie’s life might well be enhanced were both she and others to have a greater respect for her autonomy, and ends by claiming that line drawing is not the appropriate metaphor for sorting out the moral complexities of intraspecific ethics.

Professor Sapontzis, like Comstock, reads Frey as asserting that autonomy is a crucially important determinant of a being’s moral standing, but can find no justification for assigning it such an overweening status. As Sapontzis sees it, valorizing autonomy is a result of either logical errors, or of arbitrarily insisting that the preferences of a subclass of human beings ought to be a universally valid standard of moral worth. Furthermore, even were Frey able to show that possessing autonomy did confer on human beings “moral superiority,” it would not follow that humans had the right to exploit and kill nonhumans.

Professor Frey* has many reservations about Comstock’s analysis—he is not convinced, for instance, that Carrie’s life is bereft of autonomy in the same way that the lives of nonhumans are—but his main objection is that his position has been misconstrued. As a utilitarian, he does not assign to autonomy any kind of “trump card” status. Possessing autonomy does not guarantee the inviolability of one’s life or other interests against sufficiently important competing interests. Nor does lacking it render a being without moral value.

All these essays inspire reflection on how to refine our understanding of autonomy, and on why it is morally important. Such activity is a genuine contribution to moral discourse about the place of nonhumans in a secular, pluralistic society.

* Professor Frey’s commentary, presented at the March, 1990 Society for the Study of Ethics and Animals meeting, was not available for publication.

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**In Praise of Pigs**

Pigs are the breath of the mud,
the bristly warmth of tough skin,
the outcome of ovals and curves.
Pigs are earth movers,
rooting for what is buried—
philosophers’ stones, sapphires, gold—
which things pigs know are found
with the worms, the grubs, and the snails.
Pigs love life,
the touching of snouts,
the squealing of throats,
the unimportance of eyes.

Susan J. Armstrong