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Book review
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Personal Autonomy in Society

Marina Oshana, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, xii, 190 pages (incl. Index), £55 (hbk), ISBN-13: 978-0-7546-5670-8, ISBN-10: 0-7546-5670-5.

In recent years, as Taylor argues, the concept of autonomy has become ubiquitous in moral philosophy. Discussions on the nature of autonomy, its value, and how it should be respected are now commonplace in philosophical debates (Taylor 2005: 1). However, personal autonomy is not a new topic. Since the nineteenth century, with the theoretical development accomplished by contemporary Western philosophers, such as Frankfurt, Dworkin, Beauchamp and Childress, the mainstream views of personal autonomy (for example, the 'hierarchical analyses' and the 'principle-based' approach) have been formed and accepted universally. But only recently have contemporary moral and political philosophers started to explore the concept of personal autonomy from an alternative perspective. The book *Personal Autonomy in Society* by Marina Oshana aims to contribute to this area by developing a social-relational account of personal autonomy.

This volume consists of eight chapters, divided into two parts. In the first part, chapters 1-2, Oshana begins with a look at some non-controversial thoughts in order to familiarise the reader with a general idea of autonomy, followed by an analysis of the traditional understanding of the notion of personal autonomy (known as 'psychological authenticity accounts' or 'proceduralist account'). The second part, chapters 3-7, is the main one. Here Oshana not only criticises the mainstream accounts of personal autonomy, but also formulates her social-relational approach. In these five chapters, she strongly argues against the claim that autonomy is a personal psychological phenomenon, and uses much ink to expound why the social-relational perspective is crucial for people to understand the nature and the value of autonomy. It especially deserves to be mentioned that Oshana includes five

interesting case studies (“voluntary slavery”, “the angel in the house”, “Taliban women”, “the monk” and “the would-be surrendered women”). With these case studies she seeks to illustrate that autonomy should not be procedural, personal and psychological but substantial, social and relational. Furthermore, she argues that autonomy must be understood in a certain social context, namely substantially, rather than as a kind of metaphysical capacity for choice. Additionally, through the case studies, she positively responds to critiques of the concept of autonomy raised by liberalism and points out the kind of freedom/liberty that autonomy requires. Although, in a sense, Oshana does not totally deny the critiques that, from a liberal perspective, would argue that her account is perfectionist. In her opinion, unlike the ‘procedural account’, the social-relational approach (even if it is a perfectionist one) will not only endow the majority of people with privileges but the minority with oppressions. Finally she concludes by claiming that autonomy needs the freedom and power to ‘oversee states of affairs and events vital to the administration of one’s life’, so an autonomous agent must own the liberty to ‘deliberate about and to change her values and motivations and to alter significant relations in her life if she so chooses’ (p. 159).

On the one hand, this volume substantially contributes to the philosophical theories of autonomy. Firstly, Oshana’s social-relational approach to autonomy challenges the mainstream perspective which only focuses on the personal independence and authenticity. The social and interpersonal relation is a necessary element for us to analyse both the nature and the value of autonomy and try to find a useful way to vindicate people’s right to autonomy. Secondly, Oshana develops a good explanation of the relation between *personal autonomy* and *social context*. She holds that the latter, to a large degree, determines the former. This is why the global autonomy is more meaningful than the local for people to develop. Therefore, it reminds us to take external elements (for example, the legal and political system, cultural background, interpersonal relationships and the like) seriously when we want to look at the concept of autonomy.

On the other hand, there is room for improvement. In particular some points in the text are not as clear as they could be. Oshana overstates the importance of external elements to autonomous agents, in a sense implying that people are passive actors in society, yet agents are capable of positively reflecting on the external elements and to some extent changing them. Therefore, the

individual capacity to critically reflect is a crucial condition to autonomous agents. It is also controversial to assess whether it is meaningful and possible to develop a theory of 'strong substantial autonomy'. As Oshana herself admits, her social-relational account is 'perfectionist'. According to her analysis, people will probably find that the notion of autonomy is a utopian one.

Overall, this collection criticises traditional analyses and also scrutinises how social-relational theory is applied to the concept of personal autonomy. It will be helpful for those interested in examining the concept of autonomy from a legal, political and moral perspective.

References

Taylor, J. (ed.), 2005, *Personal Autonomy: New Essays on Personal Autonomy and Its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.