Autarchy and Autonomy: A Criticism of Stanley Benn's Socialization Processes

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Introduction

Autonomy is often equated with the notion of positive liberty, as acting on one's desires, but there is a prerequisite to autonomy that is often overlooked. Stanley I. Benn names this prerequisite "autarchy" in his book A Theory of Freedom and differentiates it from the notion of autonomy.[1] He explains the conditions under which an individual is considered both autarchic and autonomous, leaning heavily on the notion of socialization, where the development of autonomy is contingent upon non-interference of a certain kind.

Herein, I seek to describe Benn's theory of both autonomy and autarchy and point out the problems I find with his formulation of autonomy. While I mostly agree with Benn's distinction between autarchy and autonomy, it is the process by which one becomes autonomous that I find trouble with because Benn simply places too much emphasis on the strength of social forces. While others may not agree with me – in fact some may think Benn does not go far enough with his explanation of socialization – I ultimately believe there is a significant amount of individual free direction of the will that is necessary to qualify as autonomous, which Benn disregards.

While Benn does not make an explicit connection between his principle of non-interference and autarchy and autonomy, there is one segment of his principle that influences the notion of autarchy that is worth describing before delving into autarchy and autonomy explicitly. When an agent is making choices, she is generally operating within a "standard choice situation," which is defined in four components.[2] (1) The agent has a range of powers, capacities, and resources. (2) The agent has opportunity costs (if the agent does x then the agent must forgo y). (3) The agent has beliefs about (1) and (2). (4) The agent has an ordered set of preferences for certain activities. The first two are objective conditions concerned with the actual state of the agent in the world while the last two are subjective conditions, contingent upon the

agents own inner feelings and cognition. These four characteristics, while Benn primarily uses them to describe the way in which interference occurs, help elucidate his more ambiguous descriptions of autarchy.

Rationality

Benn believes that there is a fundamental distinction that most philosophers have misunderstood in describing autonomy. Autarchy, as Benn describes it, is a condition separate from and necessary for autonomy. It is the condition of being self-directing, which is normally a way in which philosophers formulate autonomy, but Benn separates the two terms. In addition to being self-directing, an agent must also be minimally rational to be autarchic.[3] The standard choice situation, with components (1) - (4), is what I believe Benn means to describe minimal rationality in addition to what I have described in the endnote, though he claims that the standard choice situation is not limited to autarchic or autonomous individuals, but to all individuals. However, having the kind of self-knowledge about one's abilities and opportunity costs demands a level of rationality that some individuals simply do not have. Importantly, Benn asserts that autarchy is the normal condition of humanity. As long as an individual is not mentally handicapped, for example, or lacking in minimal rationality, then the individual would be considered autarchic.

I simply think that in order for an agent to be in a standard choice situation, she must be more than just "minimally" rational, but quite rational to knowingly discern conditions (3) and (4). Rationality is an active function of the mind, not some desire-based subconscious process. Conditions (3) and (4) imply that the agent must have accurate self-knowledge, something that is not always an easy thing to come by these days. However, it seems plausible that an agent could be in a standard choice situation (fulfilling criteria (1)-(4)), yet be delusional about her abilities, environment, resources, etc. while still retaining a modicum of rationality. If Benn means that to be in a standard choice situation, then one must have accurate beliefs about (1) and (2), thus pointing to the fact that even if one is autarchic, then one may not necessarily be capable of being in a standard choice situation.

Regardless, autonomy is a step beyond autarchy because there are further conditions added to the possession of autarchy that are necessary to attain a state of autonomy. Benn's autonomy is "an excel-

lence of character for which an autarchic person may strive…[and can] generate reasons for action."[4] Benn cites Rousseau in claiming that to be autonomous is to live "according to a law that one prescribes to oneself." The additional condition that Benn adds on to his definition of autonomy is called the nomos, which is a consistency and coherence of the beliefs that motivate an agent's actions. Autonomy requires nomos, but not all nomic agents are autonomous. There are conditions that can prevent a nomic agent from becoming autonomous.

Primarily, the source of the principles that govern an autarchic agent's life determines whether an agent is heteronymous or autonomous. A heteronymous agent is someone who receives their principles ready-made from the culture. The acceptance is made uncritically and without examination. A heteronymous agent is like a soldier that has been indoctrinated to think, act, and function in a certain fashion devised by individuals outside of itself. While a heteronymous agent may live with a set of coherent beliefs much like an autonomous person, it is in the fact that those beliefs do not stem from critical thinking that prevents the agent from being considered autonomous.

I generally agree with Benn up to this point about his theory, though his notion of minimal rationality and standard choice situations lack clarity, but this is where Benn and I diverge. The nature of what it is to be an autonomous individual, to become an autonomous individual is at stake. He makes a claim about culture and socialization that undermines his own notion of autonomy and inaccurately represents the nature of the autonomous being. Benn states that "the basic presuppositions of the culture which has furnished the very conceptual structure of his world…[even] the very canons of rationality that he employs …have been learned as part of his cultural heritage." Benn does not think that enculturation undermines his own formulation of autonomy at all, but I think that it does. What Benn fails to realize is that if the tools by which one thinks critically about certain beliefs are enculturated then there is a certain area of beliefs which must be blindly accepted in order to critically understand other beliefs essential to one's autonomy.

Benn's Weaknesses

In a sense, ways of thinking, formal or otherwise, must be accepted in order to critically assess other beliefs. Short of formal logic, just the simple act of thinking could be said to be enculturated in the

way that Benn describes the socialization processes. How could one hope to be autonomous at all if some deterministic process of enculturation dictates how one's beliefs will be assessed, effectively determining the individual? Benn anticipates this critique and responds to it by claiming that even if an agent cannot question certain beliefs because his system of logic deems it logically impossible, then this does not violate the agent's autonomy. Benn is allowing for a certain amount of relativism in his formulation of autonomy. However, if the socialization process simply instills "guilty feelings," and the agent is inhibited by them, then the agent's autonomy is certainly unattainable.[6]

For example, if an agent is a member of a cultural group that holds a certain action X to be deplorable, that cultural group will have some reasoning for why X is deplorable and should be held to be deplorable. Whether or not the cultural group's reasoning is logically coherent is a moot point because guilty feelings are often attached to behavior deemed outside the social norm of a cultural group. Based on an internal view of the culture, the reasoning will seem sound and the guilty feelings justified, allowing for autonomous agents within the culture provided that they meet the other criteria. From an external view of the culture, the reasoning may appear illogical and disjoined, and the guilty feelings become the driving force behind the reasoning of the agent within the cultural group. From one's perspective the agent is autonomous, but from another perspective, the agent is not.

Benn's response is contradictory. If even the system of reason that one possesses is enculturated, and is in itself a belief, then it should also be subject to the same scrutiny of beliefs as certain feelings or religious beliefs. Benn fails to realize that by the strict standards of socialization that he sets in his book, he has undermined his whole notion of using critical reason to challenge and assess one's own beliefs. Benn's only hope is that a plural tradition will offer enough diverse resources to help criticize the resources that are handed to the agent. The tension between diverse beliefs that criticize each other is Benn's only ground for the realization of autonomous individuals, but in a society that is not plural, the members of that society will have no hope of autonomy.

Benn's hope does not solve the problem, since there is still some acceptance of certain facts in order to assess other beliefs, so a true definition of autonomy does not develop. The act of choosing, apart from critical reason and feelings, is in itself significant. There is a creation going on, a development of the self, that arises simply by choosing.

Personal experience and development is not accounted for in Benn's theory. He does speak about learning and education, of a culture actively pouring into an agent, but he fails to mention the agent actively experiencing certain things in the agent's immediate environment by choice and learning from those of one's free will. As an individual, the choice to accept or rebel as against one's culture is an individual act directed by one's will. It is a creative act, and I believe it could arise from oneself spontaneously apart from one's culture.

It is not an easy thing to be autonomous, even Benn admits that, but by the time he defines autonomy, it becomes clear that being autonomous is much easier than he at first made it seem. If we applaud autonomy so much, then there must be something worth applauding, and Benn steals that away when he defines autonomy. Autonomy is a process, not a permanent state of being. We may never truly attain it, but by slowly severing ourselves from being dictated by a culture, we may be able to drive towards autonomy. If autonomy is necessarily derived from being self-directing in a coherent way, then it is derived from an agent as an individual. I cannot be directed by my culture; there is a level of control that I must have over the process of my formation. Benn ultimately fails to recognize this, and while highlighting some basic distinctions between autarchy and autonomy, the flaws in his formulation of autonomy are too fundamental to rework that segment of his theory.

END NOTES

1. Stanley I. Benn, *A Theory of Freedom*, in *Freedom: a philosophical anthology*, ed. Ian Carter, Matthew H. Kramer, and Hillel Steiner (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 326-332.
2. Benn, 326.
3. Benn is exceedingly silent and ambiguous about the standard for minimal rationality. It seems that decision making on a cost-benefit basis and to understand at some level the consequences of one's actions are two condi tions that Benn would assign to the category of minimal rationality.
4. Benn, 328.
5. Benn, 330.
6. Benn, 331.