Meanings of the Autonomy Concept

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Abstract: The concept of autonomy has a long way to go as it is used as a synonym for the terms self-government or self-determination (Crudu, 2007). This concept is placed in the context of debates on morality, bioethics, law or political philosophy, and it also appeals to self-awareness, to the right of the individual to live life freely, in his own way, provided it does not harm other people.

In this paper we will bring to the fore the Kantian perspective of the concept of autonomy, while making the connection with the concept of freedom.

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1. Introduction

The conventional interpretation of the term autonomy is opposed by the philosophical interpretation, which is closer to the concept of free will or freedom of will. As a central concept of the moral theory, there are two meanings, “a formal meaning and a substantive meaning, depending on how it is defined – as a set of conditions (separately) and sufficient (together) for a choice to be considered free, even if it is wrong and as a form of rationality that excludes wrong choices” (Iancu, 2013).

Gerald Dworkin defines the concept of autonomy as “the second-order ability of some people to reflect critically on their preferences and desires and the ability to accept or try to change them in order to bring them into line with their preferences and higher values” (Dworkin, 1988). Rawls, for instance, believes autonomy to be a central concept in the deontological ethics, based upon rationality: „the autonomous choices are the choices made by a person when he or she is perfectly rational, in the ideal conditions in which he or she is informed about the consequences of the choice and it is not impacted by various cognitive errors” (Iancu, 2013).

The autonomy of the will – as Kant believes – is the property of the will to be its own law (independently of any nature of the objects of volition).

2. Autonomy and morality in Kant's work

Considered to be the restorer of human dignity (Miroiu & Blebea, 2001), Kant draws two directions in his work:

- on the one hand, there is the autonomy and the categorical imperative – as a basis for the universalization of citizenship, the equality in rights and implicitly the equal treatment (Miroiu & Blebea, 2001),
- on the other hand, there is the issue of perfect and imperfect moral debts, in response to questions such as: what should I do or what am I allowed to do? (Miroiu & Blebea, 2001).

The importance of the concept of autonomy in Kant's works has been emphasized by various authors, but the starting point of the Kantian reflection is the common morality (Moreno Uran & Esponda Contreras, 2008). The existence of moral values of facts, actions and situations that

exist among human individuals is indisputable; by taking into account these aspects, the objective of the substantiation is to find the moral principle that underlies the human reason. The Kantian method of investigation is analytical: it starts from the common concept of morality and tends towards a reflection around the concept of justice.

Given that Kant claims to be universal on the issues underlying our moral judgments, we cannot start from a particular fact. In this case a previous fact of the moral experience is sought to which Kant calls a priori; when we make a moral judgment, there must be a parameter with which to measure the world, that is, a categorical imperative (Moreno Uran & Esponda Contreras, 2008). The formulation of the categorical imperative means the theoretical determination of the moral intuitions that are present in everyday activities, that is, the transition from the intuitive plan to the reflexive plan (Miroiu & Blebea, 2001). Kant proposes to find a supreme principle of morality by the following method: starting from the analysis of the vulgar moral knowledge, the principle of morality will be sought synthetically (Moreno Uran & Esponda Contreras, 2008).

In the work "The foundation of the metaphysics of morals" Immanuel Kant outlines the concept of autonomy in its purest form, as the term represents "a moral imperative from which a series of ethical obligations is deduced and which also represents the observance of informed and free consent" (Mureșan, 2009). The categorical imperative is formulated as follows:

- "to act according to that maxim by which you can also make it a universal law" (Kant, 2007);

- "to act as if the maxim of your action should become the universal law of nature through your will" (Kant, 2007);

- "to act in such a way as to use humanity both from yourself and from someone else every time as a goal, never as a means" (Kant, 2007).

Therefore autonomy takes the place of the rational power to act morally and freely, because people have the freedom to choose and the moral individual chooses only what is good. The connection between the moral normativity and the autonomy of the will has been analyzed since the time of Kant to the present day;

- thus Christine Korsgaard argues that “the categorical imperative is the law of spontaneity of the free will” (Iracheta Fernandez, 2009);

- Stephen Darwall: "the autonomy of the will is a necessary condition for the ability to accept the norms that include deontological liabilities".

The concern for autonomy – as Ungureanu Francisc believes – has exerted a certain influence upon the contemporary Catholic moral theory which emphasizes the sensitivity for a "rational substantiation of moral norms, rejecting any alleged moral obligation from outside and from any authority" (Ungureanu, 2001).

3. Autonomy and freedom

The concept of autonomy is closely linked to the concept of freedom “and with it the universal principle of morality, which is the basis of all the actions of rational beings. The will by which they are required to represent the law in their actions is of a kind of causality of these beings, in so far as they are rational; they associate freedom, which is the property of this causality, according to which it can act independently of certain foreign causes (negative definition), as it is at the same time a causality according to different immutable laws (positive definition)” (Croitor, 2013).

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the individual autonomy is an idea that, in general, refers to a person's ability to live his or her life in accordance with his or her own beliefs, values, and so on, without external intervention and influence. However, it is considered that there is confusion between the concept of autonomy and that of freedom, but this confusion could be avoided if we consider autonomy as a condition for the existence of freedom (Martinez Muñoz, 2007). The autonomy is the expression of modernity, the modern expression of the concept of freedom; during the medieval times, freedom was analyzed as a quality of the will, inherent in man and his nature (Martinez Muñoz, 2007), as freedom implies responsibility, and the autonomy, on the contrary, excludes the responsibility. Invoking the concept of autonomy proclaims a wider, sovereign, unlimited and unconditional freedom, but freedom is subject to the objective judgment (Martinez Muñoz, 2007). While autonomy is self-examining and self-critical – freedom presupposes an examination of

conscience (Martinez Muñoz, 2007). This identification of freedom with autonomy is due to the fact that the concept of autonomy is often used to refer to freedom or independence, as understood in the pre-modern period, intrinsically linked to the human dignity (Martinez Muñoz, 2007).

In order to analyze the concepts of autonomy and freedom, we must first review the concept of freedom, because so far we have analyzed the different hypostases of autonomy. So, according to Erich Fromm, freedom is an ambiguous natural gift, because "the human being is born without the equipment that the animal possesses to act properly; the human being is dependent on his parents much longer than any animal; his or her reactions to the environment being much slower and less efficient than instinctive actions (Fromm, 1998).

Making a review of the concept of freedom, Fromm believes that during the Renaissance there was a general absence of personal freedom through the exploitation of the masses by a small minority, and man was barely "able to move geographically from a city to another city" (Fromm, 1998) as "each was related to his role in that social order" (Fromm, 1998). Regarding the freedom of the individual, Locke believes that "people are free to order their actions, to dispose of what they possess and of persons as they see fit, within the limits of the Law of Nature, without asking permission, without depending on the will of another human being" (Collinson, 1995).

As much as this aspect is concerned, Rodica Iacobescu believes that "this Law of Nature has its origin in the will of God and can be discovered with the help of reason that teaches people that, since all are equal and independent, no one should attempt to the life, health, freedom or property of another" (2005).

The problem of freedom is analyzed in Kant both morally and politically. The phrase "political freedom" still arouses interest today, as it is analyzed in the light of the eternal peace. In the theory of the eternal peace, Immanuel Kant suggests that "the history of mankind tends towards a hidden purpose, unknown to individuals, but which belongs to its very nature. This nature leads to the effective attainment of eternal peace, and if it does not actually accomplish this goal, history can be conveniently viewed as having accomplished it."

If in general freedom is seen from the perspective of liberation, when we associate it with equality, new meanings are born among which there is the autonomy; in these conditions, we cannot state that the autonomy implies only unhindered freedom, but also involvement and openness in the relationship with the other, for better governance.

4. Conclusions

The term autonomy can be analyzed from several perspectives, but in this paper we wanted to bring to the fore the philosophical perspective, so that we can later make different connections with other concepts and related fields. Nowadays, where the emphasis is increasingly on the material side of life, the ethical and axiological values must be placed in the context of debates about the morality of the human actions.

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