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An Alternative Notion of Autonomy

John C. MARALDO
Roche Chair, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

Introduction

Mainstream philosophy, the philosophy that predominates in universities in Japan and much of Asia as well as in Europe and the Americas, makes use of several pairs of oppositions that often define the framework of discussion. One of these oppositions is that between *autonomy* and *dependency*. Philosophers usually consider autonomy a positive and very significant value, and evaluate dependency negatively—although some working in the areas of virtue ethics and the ethics of care question the centrality of the value of autonomy. Philosophical literature in East Asian traditions on the other hand seem either to lack a notion of autonomy or to discard it. In the following I want to formulate, in tentative terms at least, an alternative notion of autonomy that draws upon Chinese and Japanese philosophical literature. It is important to say at the outset that I do not intend to employ some abstract idea of "East" versus "West." In fact, one can find precedents to the alternative notion I propose in the history of so-called "Western philosophy" too. Personally however I came upon the need to find an alternative notion in reading East Asian texts, and so my examples will be drawn largely from those traditions.

My textual examples moreover serve only as imperfect intimations of the notion I will propose, not as instantiations of new abstract idea of autonomy. Each of them points to some but not all features of the

alternative notion, and we can learn from what they lack as well as what they articulate. I follow the common practice of many commentarial traditions by taking these examples out of their original historical context and using them for my own purposes. But if I do not pay particular attention to historical context and to the purpose of the (often legendary) author insofar as we can know it, I do pay attention to the language and range of meanings of the texts—with the aid of expert translators. I follow here my contention that philosophy grows by way of the "trans-lation" of texts, by incorporating and transforming their questions and responses. The thinking of any era is nourished by such trans-lation.[1]

The standard notion of autonomy

The word itself comes from *auto nomos* and means being a law unto oneself (despite Kant's objective moral law); self-governance; having authority over one's own actions. Personal autonomy means (being capable of) self-governance which makes possible accountability. It is linked to self-integration or authenticity as opposed to alienation or being at war with oneself. Some antonyms are: dependency; loss of self-control; brainwashing, compulsion; submission to authority; slavery.

My focus here is on the notion of personal autonomy, which has been translated into several different Japanese terms: 自律, 自律性, 自立, 自主, 自主体, and even 主体性 which is usually the translation for *subjectivity*. It is important to note that *personal autonomy* differs from *group autonomy* or *political autonomy*: personal autonomy assumes an intimate relationship between the actor or agent and her

1. I explain this notion in more detail in my articles"Tradition, Textuality, and the Trans-lation of Philosophy: the Case of Japan." *Japan In Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives.* Steven Heine & Charles Fu, ed. SUNY Press, 1995, pp. 225-243; and Defining Philosophy in the Making," in *Japanese Philosophy Abroad* , ed. James W. Heisig (Nagoya: Nanzan University Press, 2004), pp. 220-245, translated into Japanese as 生成中の哲学を定義すること in 日本哲学の国際性——海外における受容と展望 in日本哲学の国際性——海外における受容と展望, ed. James W. Heisig. Tokyo: Sekai shisō sha, 2006, pp. 261-294.

own authority to act which she as a person has but a group does not.[2] What characterizes this notion of autonomy?

I am autonomous when I can exercise the power to act of my own will or on my own intentions. When others have power over me, I am autonomous when I authorize that power. Thus I remain an agent, a person who acts on his own. Personal autonomy entails that one's self alone is entitled to initiate one's actions. As Sarah Buss writes, "an agent is one who acts. In order to act, one must initiate one's action. And one cannot initiate one's action without exercising one's power to do so. Since nothing and no one has the power to act except the agent herself, she alone is entitled to exercise this power, if she is entitled to act. This means that insofar as someone is an agent i.e., insofar as she is one who acts — she is correct to regard her own commitments to acting, her own judgments and decisions about how she should act, as authoritative."[3]

What is the appeal of the idea of personal autonomy? Why do we want autonomy?

If I am autonomous, I can and do act on my own, following my own desires and intentions. If I am autonomous, I am the source of my actions, hence both commendable for them and accountable for them. What I do will not be forced upon me; I will do it of my own volition. Whatever outside influences there may be on me, they are such that I will accept or authorize them and so I count as the author of my actions. I am often willing to follow the orders of others or comply with their wishes but I never want their will forced on me, for that would deny me a most intimate and essential part of myself, would in effect negate me. I cannot truly *be* without being a person who acts for himself, by himself. When I act for others, for their benefit, I do so of my own accord. If I "sacrifice myself" for others it means I have chosen to do so. If others compel me to made a choice I do not

2. I take this point, and much else in my presentation of the standard idea, from the excellent article by Sarah Buss, "Personal Autonomy", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/personal-autonomy/>.

3. Buss, "Personal Autonomy."

want to make, it is really their choice, not mine. If I am autonomous, I am myself, free, self-ruled, self-governed, expressive of myself, able to fulfill a fundamental impetus of my being.

Of course I can also be weak-willed, I can "know better" but not do what I should do. Or I can be ignorant of what I should do. I can be of a divided mind and have conflicting desires and act arbitrarily on one rather than another. I can probably, in some sense, deceive myself about what I want or about how much I am in control to act as I want. I can be oblivious of the strength of influences on my desires and my actions. Or I can sometimes tire of wanting and desiring and choosing and acting on my own, and want to let circumstances determine what happens or let the will of others prevail. But these deficient modes of self-determination partially confirm as well as challenge the idea of autonomy. If I am weak-willed I myself have the power to know better. If I am ignorant of what I should do, what I do do is still taken as my own action. If I am ignorant of the causes of my actions, I still have the power to think of them as my own. If I am of a conflicted mind and act arbitrarily, I myself know of choices I did not make. If I tire of having to decide and would rather rest in resignation, that is what I myself want. And even if "I myself" turns out to be an idea built on shifting sands, everyday experiences confirm its elusive solidity.

There are significant internal challenges to my personal autonomy: personal subjugation, compulsions, obsessions, addictions. In Sarah Buss's explanation, I am autonomous in face of these challenges when I can distance myself from my mental states that move me to act and can be responsive to reasons. (Presumably, to be self-integrated, I would have either to unify my motives to act or discard some of them.)

The external challenges to my personal autonomy are oppression and subjugation by others such as harsh governments or dominating persons. Explanations of autonomy often do not address how to remain autonomous in face of such challenges; rather they call for a change in the oppressor. Explanations also do not address the question of how one might deal with factors that are necessarily, by

nature, beyond one's control. Autonomy is human-oriented or, more precisely, self-oriented.

Within the differing accounts of autonomy are disagreements about the scope of autonomy and the conditions under which it is preserved. Though the authors may differ, they generally acknowledge that behind the idea of personal autonomy lies a metaphysical conception of the person. I will not try to explain this metaphysics here, but instead will mention the practical assumptions I find in the standard idea of personal autonomy.

Presuppostions of the standard notion

What are the assumptions behind the standard idea of autonomy? In brief, they are the assumptions that

1. I am a self-contained subject who has, or should have, the power to act on his own.

2. There can be a gap between me or my potential power and what actually happens, the action. And if what happens does not issue from me or my decisions, then we cannot properly even call it an action.

3. Actions (and intentions) not under my control but issuing from me are detriments to me, my well-being, my autonomy, my freedom; they must be the result of external forces or forces not authorized by me—or they must be of the nature of compulsions, impulsive behavior, brainwashing, or additions. If not willed and authorized by me then not mine, not autonomous, therefore forced;

And hence, 4. the assumption that we can speak of the causes of actions as forces, where the forces could be my own, me acting as a force, or not my own but endorsed by me, or forced upon me. Autonomy is connected to agency and then to force. The opposite, loss of autonomy, is connected to dependency, compulsion, loss of self-control.

Toward an alternative notion of personal autonomy

If a metaphysical conception of the person underlies the standard idea of personal autonomy, as Sarah Buss asserts, then an alternative metaphysics of the person might provide an alternative idea of autonomy—and of action and agency. I do not want to propose an alternative metaphysics, however, but will start with examples that intimate an alternative idea of autonomy. In fact, my examples come from disparate but related traditions that themselves imply somewhat different conceptions of the person.

An example from the Chan or Zen tradition

A perhaps surprising example can be found in Discourse XVI of *the Record of Linji* of the Chan/Zen tradition:

"...this very man of the Way, dependent upon nothing, comes forth in control of every circumstance....Followers of the Way, if you want to accord with the dharma, just be men of great resolve. If you just shilly-shally spinelessly along, you're good for nothing. Just as a cracked jug is unfit to hold ghee, so he who would be a great vessel must not be taken in by the deluded views of others. Make yourself master everywhere, and wherever you stand is the true [place]. 還是這箇無依道人, 乘境出来…

道流, 爾若欲得如法, 直須是大丈夫兒始得. 若萎萎隨隨地. 則不得也. 夫如嗄之器, 不堪貯醍醐. 如大器者, 直要不受人惑. 隨處作主, 處皆眞." [4]

There are several significant links to standard idea of autonomy in this example, indicated by the words and phrases in italics: [be] *dependent upon nothing...in control of every circumstance*. *Make yourself master*. Be of great *resolve*, of self-determination (finding the truth for yourself), rather than submitting to the views of others or going along irresolutely. Notice the imperative verbal forms: "be..." , "make your-

4. *The Record of Linji* translation and commentary by Ruth Fuller Sasaki, edited by Thomas Yūhō Kirchner. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), pp. 206-8.

self…". Notice also the intimations of authenticity: don't be spineless, be men of great resolve, don't be taken in by the views of others; find out for yourself.

There are also significant alterations of the standard idea: be a *follower* of the Way, not governing it (nor governing oneself). Become a great *vessel* [大器, a term adapted from the *Daode jing*], a container that accepts and holds (the truth discovered, rather than trying to define the truth for oneself). In the alternative notion we will develop, to be autonomous is not to be self-governing in the sense of being a law unto oneself, but rather to understand controlling circumstances so well that one is not overwhelmed or subjugated by them.

With respect to a fully developed alternative notion of autonomy, however, this example lacks a crucial element: an explicit reference to the social relationships that are implied by the idea of autonomy. Social relationships are relations between oneself and others. Although *autonomy* in the standard sense means *self*-governing, it necessarily bears a relation to others that interact with oneself, be it other people or forces understood as alien to oneself. One is autonomous only over against others and their power. Even where the force or controlling influence seems internal to oneself, as in the case of a compulsion or addiction, insofar as it threatens one's autonomy it is taken as alien to one's will or intention, to one's natural way of being or one's core self. *Coming forth in control of every circumstance* and *making oneself master everywhere* do not by themselves intimate the dimension of social, interpersonal relationships. Where is the Other in the alternative sense of autonomy?

An adequate answer to this question must await a more detailed proposal of a related alternative, an alternative to standard ideas of self as opposed to other. For now I would stress that the sense of mastery in alternative autonomy differs from that at work in the popularized version of the master-slave dialectic of Hegel. The master subjugates the other and enslaves him, to the point of relying on and becoming dependent on him. In Robert Brandon's perceptive interpretation of the dialectic, the master has authority with no admitted responsibility; the slave has responsibility but no recognized authority.[5] Hegel

recognized the need for the kind of reciprocity that I think the idea of autonomy requires, but it is at work only when his kind of unstable and ultimately non-autonomous mastery is dissolved (or sublated).

To extrapolate a bit from the *Record of Linji*, I think the example does suggest an alternative sense of self-mastery linked with others. The alternative sense invokes a master who is autonomous in the sense of being in control of circumstances with no need to take control over others. He is resolute and decides for himself rather than simply submitting to the views of others. Yet he has no need to subjugate others in order to free himself, nor to dominate his surrounding environment to exert his own will. Finally, and most significantly, he "accords with" reality (in Linji, with the dharma or the Way).

"According with reality" suggests another nuance of the phrase translated above as "*in control of every circumstance*" ("this very man of the Way, dependent upon nothing, comes *forth in control of every circumstance*"). How can anyone (except perhaps God) actually be "in control of every circumstance"? Who might possess this God-like power? Consider for a moment the predominant notion of control. The predominant notion denotes an exertion of power over something to direct it, restrict it, or stop it from acting. To practice self-control by controlling one's desires, for example, is to stop oneself from "automatically" acting on those desires. This notion of control is close to the idea of governing implicit in the literal meaning of personal autonomy as self-governing. The idea behind governing oneself in the question of autonomy is, as we have noted, to prevent or disallow others from controlling oneself; but to govern oneself is also to control oneself and not give in to inner impulses that would restrict one's power to act of one's own will. Similarly, to govern others is to direct and restrict them in some measure. To govern or control one's circumstances would be to bend them somehow to one's will, so that they accorded with what one wanted or intended. Self-control and

5. Robert Brandon understands Hegel's argument as saying that "unless authority and responsibility are commensurate and reciprocal, no actual normative statuses are instituted." Brandom, R. Interview. Summer 2008. Video: http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-1034802594689246468. 15m:25s.

control of other people or things, in this standard sense of the phrase, denotes restricting them so that they conform to the will of the one in control. They must accord with the one in control; the one in control need not accord with them. The alternative sense of autonomy requires an alternative sense of control: being in accord with....forces both within and beyond one's control.

How can one who is "in control of all circumstances" still be in accord with reality, with circumstances themselves? When one accords with circumstances, particularly those deemed "beyond one's control," one willingly yields to them so as not to be overwhelmed by them or unwillingly controlled or dominated by them. One is in a position to "freely use circumstances," which is an alternate translation of 乗境. (Yanagida Seizan, Iriya Yoshitaka, and Akizuki Ryūmin parse the phrase as 境を使いこなす) If I may be allowed a very free translation, the word 乗 (translated above as "in control") can in other contexts mean "be carried by" as when one is carried by or rides a horse or a bicycle. In riding a horse one must be in control but lets himself be carried by the horse; he must allow the horse to move of *its* own power. In riding a bicycle one must balance oneself continuously and remain in one control of the direction; but balancing oneself requires the practice of harmonizing one's own weight with the weight of the bicycle, not resisting but going along with the pull of gravity. The bicycle rider is autonomous when his activity conforms to the force of gravity. To use an English idiom, the master who is autonomous in the alternative sense *rides the environment without riding roughshod over others.*

Confucian examples that link with social relationships

Examples from Confucian traditions intimate better than our Buddhist example the aspect of autonomy that implies social relationships or interaction with other people. Confucian notions of *ren* 仁 offer a starting point. Usually, 仁 is not connected to autonomy at all, and scholars like Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. note that there

is no corresponding idea in classical Chinese thought.[6] Nevertheless I think we can find a straightforward connection with autonomy.

Classical notions of 仁 imply both the reference to oneself and a reference to others that the notion of personal autonomy requires. The two parts of the kanji 仁, 人 and 二, reflect this double reference: "one cannot become a person by oneself," as Ames and Rosemont put it.[7] Further, although the metaphysics of the person implied in classical Chinese thought may differ from that the modern notion of autonomy, the person of 仁 and the autonomous person are both considered achievements; one achieves 仁 and one accomplishes autonomy. At the same time, to connect the notion of autonomy with ideas in Confucian traditions requires that we alter the standard notion in some significant ways.

Altering the standard notion 1: questions of self-discipline and reciprocity

As we noted earlier, autonomy in the standard sense means to be one's own person. In contrast, 仁 requires that one not be motivated by selfishness. The *kogaku* scholar Yamaga Sokō quotes Confucius in this regard: "'Humaneness' 仁 makes people truly human. One becomes humane by 'overcoming selfishness and returning to propriety'" 克己復禮為仁 (*Analects* 12.1).[8] Autonomy in the standard sense implies that one acts out one's own will, but 仁 requires subduing that will when it is directed primarily to one's own desires. The Neo-Confucian scholar Kaibara Ekken also quotes from the same passage in the *Analects*, which in another translation reads: "If for one day a person can *subdue himself* and return to propriety, all under heaven,

6. *The Analetcs of Confucius. A Philosophical Translation* by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosement Jr. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), p. 54.

7. Ames & Rosemont, *The Analetcs of Confucius,* p. 48. They note however that oracle bone inscriptions combine 人 and 上, which came to be written as 二.

8. Trans. John Allen Tucker. *Sourcebook in Japanese Philosophy*, ed. James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, & John C. Maraldo. Forthcoming.

the world will return to humaneness." 一日克己復禮 天下歸仁焉.[9] Kaibara also comments, "One day means for a sustained period. It refers to an ongoing period of moral practice. 'Disciplining oneself and returning to propriety' is an extremely difficult thing. Sustained effort toward that must be made over a long period of time." Elsewhere Kaibara writes, "people must practice *self-control* regarding [their own happiness at the expense of others' happiness].[10] Even the standard notion of personal autonomy calls for disciplining oneself, at least to free oneself from internal forces in governing oneself. But the Confucian examples suggest another aspect as well: the reciprocity of autonomy: if my autonomy and that of others go hand in hand, then one who acts only selfishly is not truly autonomous insofar as he jeopardizes the autonomy of others. Confucius puts it in a positive way: When Fan Chi asked him about *ren* 仁, his reply was "Love others." 愛人 (*Analects* 12.22).

Altering the standard notion 2: the question of freedom from domination by others

What about the part of personal autonomy that is concerned with freedom from domination by others? This brings us to the second connection that alters the standard idea of autonomy. The standard notion stresses the importance of self-authorship and authority. In contrast, Confucian notions of 仁 seem again to undermine self-authority and stress submission to social custom.

Summarizing the standard idea of personal autonomy, Sarah Buss writes, "...every agent has an authority over herself that is grounded, not in her political or social role, nor in any law or custom, but in the simple fact that she alone can initiate her actions...In order to form an intention to do one thing rather than another, an agent must regard her own judgment about how to act as authoritative — even if it is

9. Trans. Mary Evlyn Tucker, *Sourcebook in Japanese Philosophy*, my emphasis.
10. Trans. John Allen Tucker. *Sourcebook in Japanese Philosophy*, my emphasis.

only the judgment that she should follow the command or advice of someone else."[11] In contrast, Confucius and his Japanese interpreters want one to submit to 禮, propriety. Ames' and Rosemont's translations of terms in *The Analects*, however, reveal another side to what seems like one-sided submission. They translate 仁 as "authoritative conduct," "to act authoritatively," or "authoritative person." The person of 仁 is authoritative in the sense that she acts as the authority on proper conduct in a community, as well as in the sense of "'authoring' the culture for one's own place and time." (See 15.29) In the *Analects*, the passage cited above by both Yamaga and Kaibara continues: 為仁由己而由人乎哉. Ames and Rosemont translate: "Becoming authoritative in one's conduct is self-originating-how could it originate with others?" They translate *Analects* 4.3 as "The authoritative person alone has the wherewithal to properly discriminate the good person from the bad." 唯仁者能好人能惡人.[12]

Further, 仁 conveys the sense of reciprocity that the alternative sense of autonomy requires: "Authoritative persons establish others in seeking to establish themselves and promote others in seeking to get there themselves. Correlating one's conduct with those near at hand can be said to be the method of becoming an authoritative person." 夫仁者, 己欲立而立人, 己欲達而達人. 能近取譬, 可謂仁之方也已 (*Analects* 6.30).[13]

Freedom from domination by others also requires a benevolent government as a social institution. What is the early Confucian model of government? Numerous passages in the *Analects* reflect the reciprocity of ideal governing. One example is 2.3: "Lead the people with administrative injunctions (*zheng* 政) and keep them orderly with penal law (*xing* 刑), and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (*de* 德) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) and they will

11. Buss, "Personal Autonomy."

12. Ames & Rosemont, *The Analetcs of Confucius,* p. 152 and p. 89 respectively.

13. Ames & Rosemont, *The Analetcs of Confucius,* p. 110.

develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves."「道之以政, 齊之以刑, 民免而無恥 ; 道之以, 齊之以禮, 有恥且格.[14] Ames and Rosemont refer to proper governing 政 as "noncoercive governing" where authority is "authoritative rather than authoritarian." We may recall that autonomy is opposed to force and coertion is the exercise of force; thus noncoercive governing means government that does not force others or need to enforce laws. They also see in this idea an analog to the Daoist 無爲 or "nonassertive action."[15] (pp. 231-2, n. 21).

The notions of governing in Japanese Confucians need further investigation here. Many wrote in support of harsh domination by a central government, the Tokugawa bakufu.

Features of the alternative sense of autonomy

What can we conclude from this preliminary inquiry? What alternative notion of autonomy do the examples point to? If we list the elements of such a notion, we now have an alternative autonomy that entails

- Self-mastery but not mastery over others
- A method of self- mastery or self- governing by which one accords with something that transcends self, accords with the Dharma, follows the Way; or practices (ritual) propriety.

(That with which one accords is transcendent in the sense that it is not merely a matter of human conventions or institutions like governments. It is not transcendent in the sense of being above and beyond this world, as is the God of Judeo-Christianity and Islam.

- An ongoing practice
- A power by which one accords with natural conditions necessarily beyond one's control, by acting within them or internalizing them, making them one's own. To accord with is not to aquiesce, give in to,

14. Ames & Rosemont, *The Analetcs of Confucius,* p. 76.
15. Ames & Rosemont, *The Analetcs of Confucius,* p. 231-2, note21.

or give up.

- Reciprocity
- A way of governing others by letting others govern themselves (Laoxi) or by showing others how to govern themselves by being an exemplary model, a 仁者, or a 君子 (Confucius).

The presupposition of the alternative notion is a recognition of interdependence, as opposed to strict independence.

To conclude, let me offer a tentative formulation of the alternative notion of autonomy:

Autonomy is the practice of self-mastery or self-control that enables one to act in accordance with one's true nature, hence one's authentic desires and intentions, which are at one with the natural universe and respectful of others. Autonomy is reciprocal: it is exercised fully only when it is exercised mutually. That means that human institutions like government, social laws, marriage, etc., ideally act as mediators of personal autonomy, allowing and promoting personal mutual autonomy. Governments that so act are themselves autonomous in an alternative sense of political autonomy.

No doubt this long definition will need to be refined. For now I want to reiterate that I have found this sense of autonomy most pronounced and best articulated in Sino-Japanese philosophies, although by no means is it totally absent in traditional European philosophy. My hope is that the trans-lation of texts from a variety of traditions will enable us to discover alternatives to predominant oppositions, and will transform the arena in which philosophy is practiced.