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Part I
1
The Modern Ideal of Autonomy

1.1. Introduction

In contemporary society there are many different views of what an ideal person is. As I said in the preface, by ‘ideal person’ I mean the sort of person we wish to be, we aspire to. One of those ideals seems to be dominant: the ideal of a person which I roughly define as ‘the autonomous person’. Most of us want to be, and to be seen as, beings that (are able to) govern themselves and their lives. We do not like other people telling us what to do, want, or be. We wish to (be able to) evaluate, decide, and do what we want. Moreover, this ideal is often linked to the belief that being autonomous is precisely being a person in the fullest sense of that word: if we attain autonomy, we realise ourselves as persons. The personal wish to have the capacity of, and to be in the state of, autonomy, is then also the wish to be a fully realised person. For example, if I wish to decide myself about which profession to take up, I may argue that as a person I have the capacity to make this decision myself, and that if I get the opportunity to use this capacity I get the chance to realise myself as a person in the sense of becoming more fully a person. Thus, the ideal of the autonomous person is a claim about what we are and ought to be.

The ideal of autonomy is present in contemporary philosophical discussions. Its presence as an ideal in the literature on autonomy is widely recognised. For example, in Harm to Self1 (1986) Feinberg distinguishes between four meanings of autonomy,2 autonomy as an ideal being one of them. However, the ideal also appears in discussions of related issues, and of freedom in particular. Whether it is expressed explicitly or not, discussions about freedom often illuminate the ideal of the autonomous person. Whether in discussions of freedom, free
will, or the nature of persons, we can identify a dominant normative position on what a person should be (i.e. an ideal of a person) that is either directly present in the discussion or indirectly motivates the arguments and the underlying assumptions. This can be illustrated by looking at the following influential contributions to recent philosophical discussions of freedom: Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between two kinds of liberty, Christman’s and Feinberg’s definitions of autonomy, Harry Frankfurt’s hierarchical model of the volitional structure of a person, and Charles Taylor’s concept of ‘strong evaluation’. I will use the ideas of these contemporary authors to outline the modern ideal of the autonomous person.

My answer to the question ‘What do we mean if we say that we aspire to be autonomous persons?’ will constitute the first step in the dialectical structure of my argument in Part I: the thesis.

1.2. Berlin, Christman, and Feinberg

In his famous essay ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ (1958), Isaiah Berlin distinguishes two senses of freedom or liberty (he uses both words interchangeably). He first characterises a ‘negative’ sense as an ‘answer to the question “What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?”’. Secondly, he develops a ‘positive’ sense as an ‘answer to the question “What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?”’ (Berlin 1997 (1958): 194). Of the two senses, the ‘positive’ sense of freedom is particularly revealing with regard to the content of the contemporary ideal of autonomy:

The ‘positive’ sense of the word ‘liberty’ derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men’s, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realising them. This is at least part of what I mean when I say that I am
rational, and that it is my reason that distinguishes me as a human being from the rest of the world. I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by reference to my own ideas and purposes. I feel free to the degree that I believe this to be true, and enslaved to the degree that I am made to realise that it is not. (Berlin 1997 (1958): 203)

One of the first things we notice about this passage is Berlin’s repeated reference to the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master, a subject, a willing, active being. This reference to wishes indicates that to be this kind of individual is thought to be an ideal, something the individual wishes and aspires to be(come). Secondly, we can see that the ideal Berlin describes is an ideal of autonomy because it captures what Christman calls the ‘core’ meaning of autonomy. This is the meaning Feinberg’s distinct conceptions centre on: ‘the actual condition of autonomy defined as a psychological ability to be self-governing’ (Christman 1989: 5). In other words, Berlin’s conception of ‘positive’ freedom presents us with an excellent picture of the ideal of a person as an autonomous individual; and it is precisely this ideal that is dominant in the literature. Berlin’s description of ‘positive’ freedom suggests that discussions about autonomy focus on questions about the source of control and determination. The ideal of the autonomous individual suggests the following answer: the source should be me, and not something or somebody else. I should determine myself; not something or somebody else. In other words, I exemplify this ideal of what a person should be when I am this autonomous individual, when the source of my action and my thought is me, when I determine myself as an individual. What we mean when we call this an ‘ideal’ is simply that it is a state or condition to which an individual should aspire. In his essay ‘The Idea of a Free Man’ Feinberg puts it like this: ‘I am autonomous if I rule me, and no one else rules I’ (Feinberg 1973: 161). This is the core content of the ideal of a person present in Berlin’s more elaborated description.

1.3. Frankfurt

If we say that we want to be self-determining, part of what we mean is that we (want to) see ourselves as different from ‘the world’ with its deterministic character; if we understand the world as fully determined by the laws of science, we want to say that we’re different
from that world since we have a free will. In ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person’ (1971) Frankfurt identifies one essential difference between persons and other creatures in the structure of the person’s will: persons are able to form second-order desires. ‘Besides wanting and choosing and being moved to do this or that, men may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are’ (Frankfurt 1982 (1971): 82). Frankfurt then makes a distinction between two different kinds of agents: persons and wantons. Frankfurt uses the term ‘wanton’ to refer to an agent who does not care about his will. This means that ‘his desires move him to do certain things, without its being true of him either that he wants to be moved by those desires or that he prefers to be moved by other desires’ (Frankfurt 1982 (1971): 86). The key difference between persons and wantons is that although wantons may have second-order desires (to want to have a certain desire), only persons are able to form what Frankfurt calls second-order volitions: the person ‘wants a certain desire to be his will’ and, as I interpret this requirement, succeeds in having that will (Frankfurt 1982 (1971): 86). A person is able to do this only in virtue of his rational capacities. ‘For it is only in virtue of his rational capacities that a person is capable of becoming critically aware of his own will and of forming volitions of the second order. The structure of a person’s will presupposes, accordingly, that he is a rational being’ (Frankfurt 1982 (1971): 87).

Whether Frankfurt’s distinction between second-order desires and second-order volitions (and therefore between wantons and persons) is convincing or not, it is clear that his discussion embodies a certain ideal of a person. For many of us, Frankfurt’s account of a person is not only a description of what persons essentially are (that is, we agree with his view about what persons are); it is also an ideal by which we wish to live as persons. We want to be able to decide whether we endorse a first-order desire or not, we want to be able to choose between various (first-order) desires. We want to ‘want a certain desire to be our will’ and succeed in having that will (Frankfurt 1982 (1971): 86). We want to succeed, not just want; we want to be in control. Otherwise, to use Frankfurt’s terminology, we are a wanton, not a person, and this we do not wish to be. We place a high value on persons in Frankfurt’s sense – we value the idea of a self-determining individual able to form higher-order desires and govern his first-order desires by them.
1.4. Taylor

Charles Taylor goes further than Frankfurt in arguing that persons not only have the capacity to question their (first-order) desires, but also the capacity to question themselves. In ‘Responsibility for Self’ (1976) he argues that

if we think of what we are as defined by our goals, by what we desire to encompass or maintain, then a person on this view is one who can raise the question: Do I really want to be what I now am? (i.e. have the desires and goals I now have?) In other words, beyond the de facto characterisation of the subject by his goals, desires, and purposes, a person is a subject who can pose the de jure question: is this the kind of being I ought to be, or really want to be? (Taylor 1976: 111)

This passage specifies Taylor’s conception of the ideal of a person: that he should ask himself whether this is the kind of individual he ought to be, or really wants to be. We not only have the capacity to ask these questions; many believe (exercising) this capacity is essential to what we are. Taylor claims that ‘we have the notion that human subjects are capable of evaluating what they are’ and that ‘many’ believe this kind of evaluation to be ‘essential to our notion of the self’ (Taylor 1976: 112). According to Taylor, we as a matter of fact make judgements and ‘strong’ evaluations. We do not just evaluate what to do in the sense that we desire to do this rather than that, but we also evaluate whether it’s good or not to have this desire. Taylor distinguishes between ‘someone who evaluates non-qualitatively, that is, makes decisions like that of eating now or later, taking a holiday in the north or in the south’ and someone who ‘deploys a language of evaluative contrasts ranging over desires’. Taylor refers to the latter type of a person as a ‘strong evaluator’ (Taylor 1976: 116). He argues that the capacity for strong evaluation is ‘an essential characteristic of a person’, since beings other than persons (such as animals) are either incapable of evaluating desires or are only able to evaluate as ‘a simple weigher’ (Taylor 1976: 117–18).

Taylor’s idea of strong evaluation is compatible with Frankfurt’s idea of higher-order desires. In particular, the capacity to question whether I am now the person I really want to be can manifest itself in the formation of higher-order desires, such as the desire to be a different person. In Frankfurt’s volitional account this amounts to the desire to have a different volitional structure.
Taylor explicitly refers to something like ‘ideals of a person’. He suggests that such ideals are operative in making ‘strong’ evaluations: we aspire to be a certain kind of person, and this influences our evaluations, our judgements. In particular, Taylor describes the following ideal: we should be a concerned person, concerned about the issues touching the quality of our lives which seem to us basic or important (Taylor 1976: 117). In the light of the question of autonomy, this means that we should be self-determining in the second aspect I distinguished in my introduction: we should be masters of our lives. The suggestion is that I should evaluate myself on the level of my life as a whole; I should question the way I live my life, the choices I make, the things I do. Taylor’s account, therefore, adds to what we already know from Frankfurt’s. To exercise my capacity to determine my life means that I make ‘strong’ evaluations. Strong, because I do not just classify a certain (first-order) desire as good or bad, but I question myself as a certain kind of person. Taylor calls this questioning of the self ‘radical evaluation’, a ‘reflection about the self’ which ‘engages the self most wholly and deeply’; at stake here is my identity (Taylor 1976: 126).

1.5. Further refinements

In the beginning of this chapter I claimed that autonomy is nowadays a very influential ideal in the sense that it is something many of us aspire to, and that many believe autonomy is a capacity of persons (alone) which needs to be exercised if we want to be fully realised persons. It is not my purpose here to establish the empirical validity of this claim; others are welcome to challenge it if they wish. Even if it were to turn out less important than I assume here, most readers will agree with me that (the ideal of) autonomy is at least of sufficient importance and influence in contemporary Western society and culture to merit and motivate extensive philosophical analysis and reflection.

What is autonomy? So far I have used ‘autonomy’ to refer to the capacity and exercise of self-control and self-government, of deciding yourself about your desires and your life. I have said that this involves questioning and evaluating your desires, yourself, your identity. But much of what has been said raises questions. Firstly, we could consider some broad questions about autonomy. What does it mean to say that a person decides about his life? Is the ideal of autonomy meaningful if we have little or no options available to us? Is autonomy a capacity or an achievement? What about autonomy as a political concept? Does
self-government mean that I can do what I want? How does an autonomous person relate to other (autonomous) persons? And what is the relation between autonomy and morality? Secondly, there are more specific questions about my interpretation of Frankfurt and Taylor. For example, the reader may wonder what it means ‘to want a certain desire to be your will’ or ‘to question your identity’. Many of the latter sort of questions will receive further clarification in the course of the book, in particular in the sections on Frankfurt. The first broader questions I will consider now. I will not be able to fully answer them here, but they will help me to refine my construction of the modern ideal of autonomy. Consider the following distinctions and points of clarification.

1.5.1. My desires and my life

I would first like to make a distinction between two senses of ‘self-government’, which, recall, Christman identifies as the core meaning of autonomy. To start mapping the area where the notion of self-government is applicable, we can make a distinction between, on the one hand, the issue of who is in control or who determines my desires, and, on the other hand, the issue of who is in control of or who determines my life as a whole. Discussions of freedom typically relate to both aspects. For example, Frankfurt claims that freedom requires, as we have seen earlier, the ability to form second-order desires: ‘Besides wanting and choosing and being moved to do this or that, men may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are’ (Frankfurt 1971: 82–3). This can be understood as the exercise of control over a first-order desire, or as making a choice between two conflicting first-order desires. But the result of such exercise(s) may extend beyond the present moment. If I change my preferences and purposes, my actions will probably change as well, and therefore the course of my life may change. Thus, the above distinction between control over my desires and control over my life concerns the range of the effect of the exercise of control or choice. The effect may be limited in time, for example, to this very moment when I decide to control my desire to eat, or may extend to my life as a whole, when the interplay between my desires of a higher order and my first-order desire(s) results in an effective change in the course of my life. It gives us a more complete picture of the content of the ideal to distinguish between the ideal of a person controlling his present
desires, on the one hand, and the ideal of a person directing his life. This second aspect of the ideal of a person dominant in our society and culture is at least as much present in the literature as are discussions of self-control in the more limited sense just defined. It is held, for example, that for a person to direct his life it is good (ideal) to have plenty of options available.

1.5.2. The ideal of having many alternatives

The ideal of having plenty of options available is different from the ideal of autonomy, since it is more concerned with the setting or context in which the person is choosing and acting. However, it shows concern with self-direction as the direction of one’s life as a whole. In ‘On the Necessity of Ideals’, Frankfurt writes that ‘our culture places a very high value on a certain ideal of freedom according to which a person is to have varied alternatives available in the design and conduct of his life’ (Frankfurt 1999: 108). Firstly, although he writes about an ideal of freedom, it seems clear that this ideal of freedom is closely linked to the ideal of a person: one who has many options. It seems that when the ideal of having many options available is realised, the pursuit of the ideal to design and conduct one’s own life becomes more meaningful. After all, if we have but one option available, we arguably have no real ‘option’ at all, and there is nothing left to design or to conduct for oneself. Therefore, the ideal of designing one’s own life presupposes the availability of alternatives, and, ideally, many of them. Secondly, Frankfurt is suggesting that this ideal of freedom – and therefore also this ideal of a person – is indeed an ideal, or at least a very influential idea in society: our culture places ‘a very high value’ on it.

1.5.3. Capacity and condition; political autonomy

Furthermore, using Feinberg’s distinction between the capacity for self-government and the actual state or condition of self-government, we could make a distinction between the ideal of having the capacity to govern oneself, on the one hand, and the ideal of being in a state or condition of self-government, on the other hand. A person who aspires to be autonomous might refer to the capacity, the condition, or both. Finally, it is also possible that the person aspiring to be autonomous refers to what we may call ‘political’ autonomy, which means the government of one’s own ‘domain’ (Feinberg 1986: 28). I take this to refer to self-government as a person, being able to choose and act within a certain sphere, comparable with what it means for a state to
be autonomous. Although the latter meaning will not be completely excluded (as Feinberg observes: the different meanings of autonomy are closely related), the primary object of this study is the ideal of autonomy in the first two meanings, the ideal of having the capacity to govern oneself, and the ideal of being in the condition of actually governing oneself. My discussion will make further refinement necessary, but at present I shall hold on to this distinction.

1.5.4. The ideal of ‘doing what you want’

If I have been speaking of the dominant modern ideal, this may misleadingly suggest that this ideal is so overwhelmingly dominant that there is little room for other modern ideals. It seems to me that there is at least one other ideal which is perhaps not dominant but deserves our consideration since it could be considered as a ‘rival’ ideal. In addition to the dominant modern ideal of a person as an autonomous individual I have articulated so far, there is the modern ideal of an individual who has the capacity to do, and is in the condition of doing, whatever he wants to do. I shall refer to the latter ideal as ‘the ideal of doing what you want’, ‘doing what you want’ meaning unlimited freedom of action. This ideal is arguably not less influential in modern society than the former, has been present and popular in pre-modern times too, and has been subject to criticism throughout the history of human thought. I shall maintain that there is a clear distinction between the dominant ideal of a person as someone choosing and acting as an autonomous individual and the ideal of ‘doing what you want’. There are two main sources to a denial of this distinction. Firstly, it is common in contemporary society to uncritically ignore the distinction and simply equate personal autonomy with ‘doing what you want’. Against the view that autonomy is unlimited freedom of action, we must clarify philosophically the meaning of autonomy and show that and why it is a distinct ideal from ‘doing what you want’. Secondly, apart from the ideas around in contemporary society, there is a philosophical strand and tradition of thinking about freedom and about autonomy in terms of ‘doing what you want’ (Hobbes, Hume, Mill, etc.). In opposition to these views I will affirm the modern ideal of autonomy as an ideal distinct from ‘doing what you want’, for it is as such that the modern ideal of autonomy is a significant modern ideal. It is a significant modern ideal in the sense that it is (1) a well-defined ideal, (2) a dominant ideal today, and (3) an ideal that can be defended adequately as a cogent philosophical notion. This focus on the most significant ideal of autonomy does not mean that from now
on the issue of ‘doing what you want’ is excluded from the discussion altogether. It will remain ‘in play’, since often it helps to say what the ideal of autonomy is not, and it is therefore of assistance in the process of clarification by contrast. So although the ideal of ‘doing what you want’ has not been clearly defined yet, I will do this in further discussion,8 which will bear out the precise philosophical issues at stake here, the precise points where the difference(s) between the two ideals lie(s).

It could be argued that it is not necessary to speak of two different ideals here, borrowing Feinberg’s distinction between concepts and conceptions9 (Feinberg 1986: 27–8). Feinberg distinguishes between different conceptions of the concept of autonomy, by which he means different (inter-related) meanings of this concept. The ideal of autonomy is one such conception – a conception of the concept of autonomy. In turn, this conception can be regarded as a concept, having itself different possible conceptions (meanings, interpretations) of it. Thus, if the concept I am dealing with is the ideal of autonomy, then ‘doing what you want’ is a conception of this ideal. However, calling it a conception may suggest that it is a possible, viable, and valid interpretation of autonomy, a legitimate child of the mother concept. Therefore, if we do not want to speak of distinct ideals, it would be better to apply to ‘doing what you want’ either a neutral term (interpretation) or a term relatively biased in favour of the ideal of autonomy as against ‘doing what you want’. I affirm both the distinction of autonomy from ‘doing what you want’, and the primacy of the former as an ideal over the latter. Since I argue for these positions throughout this and the following chapters, I will use the seemingly ‘biased’ way of characterising their relationship. In what follows, the starting point is the argument that there is a distinction, which will then initiate a discussion of how both distinctive elements are precisely related.

The distinction between the modern ideal of the person as an autonomous individual and what I will now call the ‘poor’ variant or wrong interpretation of this ideal, i.e. the ideal of doing what you want, can be clarified by looking at contemporary discussions of freedom. I think Frankfurt’s distinction between freedom of action and freedom of will is particularly helpful here:

A person who is free to do what he wants to do may yet not be in a position to have the will he wants. Suppose, however, that he enjoys both freedom of action and freedom of the will. Then he is not only free to do what he wants to do; he is also free to want what he wants to want. It seems to me that he has, in that case, all
the freedom it is possible to desire or to conceive. There are other
good things in life, and he may not possess some of them. But
there is nothing in the way of freedom that he lacks. (Frankfurt

So Frankfurt makes a distinction between freedom of action and
freedom of will. Freedom of action means being able to do what you
want. But the quotation above suggests that this is not ‘all the freedom
it is possible to desire or to conceive’ and so it cannot be an absolute or
unqualified ideal. For, Frankfurt’s second kind of freedom, the freedom
of the will, allows for a kind of ‘overriding’ mode of freedom, of being
able to regulate ‘doing what you want’, by not wanting a particular
first-order desire: I may desire to not want something I want. For
example, the drug addict may want to take his drug, but at the same
time may not want to want the drug, may not want to have this desire.
He has the second-order desire to not have the first-order desire.
Although Frankfurt (at least in his earlier work) does not explicitly
mention any ideal (his discussion is a discussion of freedom), he argues
that I am only fully a person if I am able to develop and exercise this
second-order desire to want or not want a certain desire to be my will
(see earlier distinction from animals and wantons (Section 1.3.). It is
this freedom, the ‘freedom of will’, and not (only) the ‘freedom of
action’ which is held to be an ideal, and which is arguably (part of) the
ideal of the autonomous person.

This is the distinction explained by using Frankfurt’s conceptual appa-
ratus; there are other ways to explain the ideal of autonomy in contrast
with the ‘ideal’ of ‘doing what you want’, and I will refer to other writers
and currents of thought later in this book. As I have suggested already,
although it is not my main purpose to defend the ideal of autonomy
against the ‘ideal’ of ‘doing what you want’, it is necessarily part of this
book. As will be shown, the view that ‘doing what you want’ is an ideal
of the person suffers from the following problems.

Firstly, it is internally inconsistent, so not an ideal. The pursuit of
‘doing what you want’ as an ideal inevitably undermines itself, since
empirically any effort to devote yourself exclusively to ‘doing what you
want’ puts you in a position in which you cannot do what you want.
To use a metaphor: you become the slave of your desires. The pursuit
of the ideal of ‘doing what you want’ is ultimately self-defeating. Apart
from the empirical argument, we can also argue for this point by using
our understanding of Frankfurt’s ideal of a person (and, as we will see,
the extended version of this ideal that will be developed in this book).
The gist of it is the idea that to really be autonomous you need to direct yourself to something which is not simply the objective of your own first-order desires. Only then it is possible to ‘identify decisively’ with a certain desire, to make it ‘your own’. Otherwise there is loss of control and a certain desire will ‘enslave’ you. (I will present this argument in due course (Chapters 3 and 4)).

Secondly, ‘doing what you want’ is arguably not a dominant ideal. Who seriously holds and practises this ideal – with its full consequences? To practice ‘doing what you want’ would imply that we always follow our desires, which is inconsistent with what we actually do. We know that we are not everywhere and always able to do what we want. For example, the mere fact that we live in society restricts our freedom to do what we want. It could be objected that although we are not able to realise the ideal, we could still wish to do what we want, it could be still our ideal. However, this is inconsistent with our beliefs: most of us believe that we also ought not always to follow our desires.

Thirdly, ‘doing what you want’ is a misinterpretation of, and so is distinct from, the ideal of autonomy (I began this argument earlier in this chapter). The grounds for the validity of this claim will be demonstrated parallel with the work done on the refinement of the ideal of autonomy; the clearer this ideal becomes, the more obvious its difference from ‘doing what you want’ will be. As noted above (see note 8 to this section), I will also explicitly point out and discuss this difference when appropriate.

1.5.5. Inner and outer autonomy

Feinberg seems to agree with the point that ‘doing what you want’ does not deserve the name ‘autonomy’. In his essay ‘The Idea of a Free Man’ (1973) we find autonomy defined as ‘I am autonomous if I rule me, and no one else rules I’. Although I have quoted this definition before, closer inspection reveals two distinctive aspects of autonomy, which I shall call an ‘outer’ aspect and an ‘inner’ aspect. This distinction is very important and will be a significant feature of the forthcoming discussion.

What I mean by the inner aspect of autonomy is captured in the phrase ‘I rule me’. The ideal of autonomy here is that we are able, in Feinberg’s words, to ‘identify with the desire that is higher in our personal hierarchy, and consider ourselves to be the subject rather than the object of constraint’ (Feinberg 1973: 148). This ideal can be refined by looking at what it would be for a person not to be autonomous. According to Feinberg, the non-autonomous person is a person who
has ‘no hierarchical structure of wants, and aims, and ideals, and no clear conception of where it is within him, that he really resides’. Such a person would be ‘a battlefield for all of his constituent elements, tugged this way and that, and fragmented hopelessly’ (Feinberg 1973: 149). Although such a person may have authentic desires and aims, desires and aims that can be called his own, he fails to possess and exercise autonomy because the internal order and structure is lacking. Feinberg argues that even though such a person may ‘do anything he wants’, he is unable to order the options available in a hierarchy. Feinberg concludes that ‘surely it is more plausible to construe such a state as unfreedom than as an illustration of the dreadfulness of too much freedom’ (Feinberg 1973: 149). This shows how ambiguous the notion of freedom is. Autonomy, by contrast, lends itself to a more precise definition, and is therefore a better candidate to use as the key concept of the modern ideal of a person. It is clear that this person – as characterised by Feinberg – is not autonomous, whatever his status in terms of freedom. ‘When the I is incapable of governing its Me, the result is anomie, a condition which is not control from without, but rather being virtually “out of control” altogether’ (Feinberg 1973: 163).

Whereas the inner aspect of autonomy refers to the relations and state of affairs within the person, I shall say that outer autonomy concerns the relationship between the person and the rest of the world, in particular other people. Indeed, I hold that since the laws of the natural world are beyond our control (we can only try to discover them and use that knowledge), the issue of autonomy in its external aspect arises only in relation to other people, and the social and cultural world in general. Again it is useful here to define autonomy by looking at one of its contrasts: ‘forms of passive mindless adjustment (the pejorative term is “conformity”) to the requirements of one’s culture’ (Feinberg 1973: 163). Here the other-direction is total; there is complete attunement to the wishes of others. Autonomous persons, on the contrary, are ‘capable of conforming if they choose. […] They will conform when and only when there are good reasons for doing so; and they can attend to reason free from the interfering static of “signals” from other voices. They can control the speed and direction of their gyroscopes… [They are not] indifferent to the reactions of others, but [they] can be moved by other considerations too’ (Feinberg 1973: 165).

What precisely is the relationship between the inner and outer aspects of autonomy? To arrive at a complete picture containing both aspects, we can use Feinberg’s comparison between the independence and self-government of the individual and the independence and
self-government of the state. He remarks that ‘self-government might turn out to be more repressive even than foreign occupation. Yet, for all of that, the state might still be politically independent, sovereign, and governed from within, hence free. Analogously, it is often said that the individual person is “free” when his or her ruling part or “real self” governs, and is subject to no foreign power, either external or internal, to whose authority it has not consented’ (Feinberg 1973: 158–9). So here we have two aspects together, the external and internal one, the outer and inner one. Only the outer is not enough for autonomy to be complete; there could be some form of ‘inner’ repression which prevents the person from attaining full autonomy. (I shall discuss ‘inner autonomy’ in the course of this book; I will return to the issue of repression in particular in Part II, Section 6.4.1.)

Feinberg reminds us that ‘free’ means also having a certain legal-political status. Historically, to be a freeman was to be a full member of the political community. One contemporary meaning of political freedom as being entitled to certain rights on the basis of membership of the state as a political community still relates to that historical meaning. However, we may say that the ideal of the autonomous person as outlined before does not depend on this political freedom. It could be imagined that somebody is literally a slave but is still able to order his desires and aims in a hierarchy. Although he is not able to do or get what he wants, he may be an ideal person in the sense that he has the balanced order of autonomy, residing completely in himself. However, it may be objected that the modern ideal of the autonomous person does include ‘not being a slave’, since this would mean that he lacks ‘outer autonomy’. Therefore, I conclude that autonomy is not a necessary condition for political freedom, but political freedom is a necessary condition for autonomy. However, I argue that although full autonomy is not possible in the condition of slavery, a slave might still possess inner autonomy. If I can choose whether to do what I have to do willingly or not, making the command my own wish or desire or not, I am still autonomous in the ‘inner’ sense. So although I’m not free and not autonomous in the ‘outer’ sense I do not lack ‘inner’ autonomy. To that extent, it may be still possible for me to realise part of the ideal of a person, whatever my legal or political status is.

This discussion shows that the distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ autonomy allows us to further analyse the meaning of autonomy and to make other distinctions which remain concealed if we applied the term ‘autonomy’ on its own. Equally, the term ‘freedom’ on its own appears to be too vague to allow for such distinctions. We
have now a clear criterion to decide whether a person is autonomous in the fullest sense of the word, namely two necessary conditions. The first condition is that I am not restrained by, and not dependent on, something inside me. The second condition is that I am not restrained by, and not dependent on, something outside me. Whether a certain condition or state of the person satisfies these criteria depends on (a) whether or not something can be identified as putting a constraint on me (‘Is it really a constraint?’ and ‘Am I really dependent on it?’ are the questions to be asked); and on (b) whether or not this constraint or source of dependence – if there is one at all (question a) – is something inside or outside me (‘Is it really an ‘inner’ constraint?’ and ‘Is it really an ‘outer’ constraint?’ are the key questions).

This criterion, based on the distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ autonomy, will be used throughout this book as an analytical tool. As an aspect of the argument about autonomy, it will be consolidated through this use, and its explanatory power will be shown more fully as the general argument of my book develops.

1.5.6. Autonomy and morality

Does autonomy include the freedom to choose evil? Considering the dominant ideal of autonomy as articulated so far, it is evident that the authors discussed share the view that autonomy and morality are to be considered as fundamentally distinct issues. Whether or not I choose evil, if it is my choice, a choice I take in the capacity of being my own master, a subject, a doer, a willing being (Berlin), if I am self-governing (Christman) and self-ruling (Feinberg), if I succeed in having the will I want (Frankfurt), if I engage in strong evaluation (Taylor), then, on this view, there is nothing in the way of autonomy that I lack. Feinberg explicitly draws a distinction between the ideal of autonomy and moral excellence, arguing that since autonomy is consistent with ruthlessness, cruelty, and other ‘failings’, it is at best only a partial ideal ‘insufficient for full moral excellence’ (Feinberg 1986: 45).

It remains to be seen whether this view can be defended as coherent. I will return to this issue in Chapter 4, where it will receive further discussion in the light of my attempt to reconcile ‘modern’ and ‘ancient’, and in Part II (for example, in my discussion there of Frankfurt). But it seems to me that there is no doubt that the view that autonomy, by itself, is morally ‘neutral’, and that an autonomous person can choose evil, is a key part of the dominant modern ideal of autonomy. There may be other views, but this is the dominant one and the one I choose to engage with in this book.
1.6. Conclusion: A sketch of the modern ideal of the autonomous person

My discussion of autonomy so far yields a reasonably clear picture of what it means to say ‘I wish to be an autonomous person’. It means that I wish to rule, govern, and determine myself. This ideal has an ‘inner’ aspect (I wish to rule my desires) and an ‘outer’ aspect (I wish not to be ruled by something outside me). If I want the latter, I also want political liberty. Furthermore, the ideal includes the wish to exercise my capacity to rule myself or the wish to be in the condition of self-rule. It can concern my present (inner or outer) situation or extend to the future and my life as a whole. It can include the wish to (be able to and be in a condition to) use my governance and rulership to evaluate and question my desires or perhaps even myself as a person. In Frankfurt’s and Taylor’s words, I wish to form higher-order desires (volitions) or engage in strong evaluation. Related to this wish is the ideal of being a person, in the sense of wishing to be different from animals or wantons, who lack this capacity of self-evaluation (inner aspect), and in the sense of wishing to have and to use the capacity of free will, to be a space of freedom in a deterministic universe (outer aspect). This ideal is different from the ideal of doing what you want; if I rule myself I constrain myself in some way. But this constraint is not necessarily moral. The dominant modern ideal of autonomy is construed as a morally neutral ideal, that is, the wish to be autonomous does not necessarily include the wish to be morally good or excellent; the wish to be autonomous and the wish to do evil are seen as consistent.

Although not all of us share this ideal of the autonomous person, there is no doubt that it occupies an influential place in our contemporary culture and society. This was not always the case. In the following chapter I will consider ‘ancient’ (as opposed to ‘modern’) ideals of the person that appear to be very different from, if not entirely opposed to, the modern ideal of autonomy.
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