

Lucas Swaine, *Ethical Autonomy: The Rise of Self-Rule*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 252 pages. ISBN: 9780190087647. Hardback: \$74.00.

Autonomous people can be bad. That is the core observation in Lucas Swaine's *Ethical Autonomy*. It is not merely that autonomous people sometimes do bad things: that they sometimes rape, murder, or torture other people (p.109). It is also that they sometimes sympathetically imagine themselves doing such things (pp.113-16) and that they sometimes seriously deliberate over committing grave evils (pp.116-18). It is that autonomous people sometimes have the willpower to carry out terrible acts (pp.120-26), that they occasionally generate the capability to intend evils in the first place (pp.126-39), and that they at times create the option of their performing them. Swaine thinks that these manifestations of autonomy are bad. Often, he says that they are intrinsically bad; it is, he says, "inherently iniquitous" to have the capability to do great wrongdoings (p.128). Often, he says that they are instrumentally bad: that they, for example, make people "more likely to perform [very evil] acts" (p.118). Swaine infers from this that autonomy is "unworthy of endorsement in its elemental form" (p.218). It is not something we should publicly vaunt and not something that societies should aim to advance. As he puts it, this amounts to a robust "critique of personal autonomy" (p.xiv).

If autonomy is unworthy of endorsement in its elemental form, is it worthy of endorsement in some other form? Swaine thinks that it is. He thinks that we should endorse "ethical autonomy." This is autonomy "modulated by moral character" (p.159). Swaine defines "character" as the normal pattern of one's thought, actions, and emotions, especially in relation to one's moral choices (p. 160-62). One has moral character when one is disposed to act, think, and feel in basically moral ways (p.163): one is disposed to be truthful, trustworthy, and to uphold one's commitments. One has strong moral character when these dispositions "remain robust even when [one is] tempted or pressured to act against [one's] ethical inclinations" (p.164). An autonomous person with strong moral character will be unlikely to act, think or feel in the bad ways that autonomous people lacking such character sometimes do (p.153). Consequentially, Swaine thinks, ethical autonomy is worth the endorsement that autonomy alone is not. It is worth publicly vaunting and societies should promote it with government policy, especially government education policy (pp.195-202).

This is a well-written, clearly structured book. The main line of argument is interesting and has much plausibility. Additionally, in setting up this argument, Swaine gives the reader much else worth considering. In Chapter 1, Swaine provides an illuminating intellectual history of the notion of autonomy. Of special interest here is his argument that, contra some other authors, the notion has always been applied to individual people; it has never been limited to organized collectives (e.g. polities). In Chapter 2 he provides a well-worked out account of personal autonomy. He takes personal autonomy to consist in four core components: critical reflection, the ability to do as one wills, various other capabilities, and the possession of broad options. This exploration of personal autonomy structures his core discussion of its pitfalls, and alternatives to it, in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 of the book. Overall, the book is well worth reading for those interested in autonomy. I recommend it.

It will be useful to make clear exactly what contribution Swaine makes to current thinking on autonomy. Swaine says that he has "giv[en] voice to an ideal that liberals have struggled to articulate" (p.218). In truth, I doubt that many philosophers will feel that this is

quite correct. As Swaine is well aware (p.98-99), Joseph Raz also observed that autonomous people can be bad in *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 380. Raz's view was that autonomy is an amplifier of value but not valuable in itself; that autonomously choosing the good is better than heteronomously choosing the good, but autonomously choosing the bad is worse than heteronomously choosing the bad. It is widely recognized that, on this view, autonomy is not worthy of unqualified endorsement. It is only worth endorsement when used to choose the good. So Swaine's central line of thought is not itself completely novel. But his is the first book-length exploration of this line of thought. It is the first really detailed exploration of the forms and consequences of the possible moral defects of autonomous people

Let me raise two substantive points about Swaine's argument. First, one might question how robust Swaine's critique of autonomy really is. It is true, of course, that if autonomy is not always on-balance valuable, then we should not always aim to promote it. But this does not entail that we should not typically aim for it in our personal lives, nor that we shouldn't generally encourage our friends and family members to be autonomous, nor that societies should not try to advance the autonomy of their members through public policy. To see this, it is useful to draw an analogy between autonomy and health. Healthy people can sometimes be great evil doers, and so health is not always on-balance valuable. We might well prefer certain great evil doers to be less than fully healthy; the world would be a better place had Pol Pot been bedbound. But that hardly implies that there is no sense in which health is "worthy of our endorsement" (p.217). Health is worthy of our endorsement precisely because it is *usually* valuable. Thus, we should aim for health in our personal lives and societies should try to advance the health of their members.

The question of how often autonomous people are bad, then, is critical. If autonomous people do not very often engage in the sorts of evil acts Swaine describes, then Swaine's critique seems a lot less robust than he intimates. In this case, publicly vaunting autonomy would not seem like, in his words, a "dangerous mistake" (p. xiv). Now Swaine does suggest that "many autonomous people are very bad actors," that "numerous of them are terrible miscreants," and that "legion" are neither "upstanding citizens" nor "fine people" (p. xiv). So he evidently thinks that many autonomous people are bad people. But it is not obvious how one would support this claim except with evidence. What is needed, it seems, is some sort of systematic accounting of how frequently autonomous people do grave wrongs. Swaine does not provide such an accounting. He observes that autonomy is compatible with serious wrongdoing, but provides little evidence that autonomy makes wrongdoing more likely than heteronomy. This seems to me to undermine the robustness of Swaine's critique of personal autonomy. It means that promoting autonomy *per se* may well make the world a better place.

Second, autonomy is not merely a value to be *promoted*; it is one to be *respected*. To see the point, imagine you have a friend who drinks too much. You could make their life better, let's suppose, by hiding their whisky. Indeed, this would not only make their life better; it would make them more autonomous in the future. Their drinking is slowly eroding the mental faculties they need to make autonomous choices. Nonetheless, you should not do this unilaterally. Hiding your friend's whisky without their permission would be a violation of their autonomy. This is so even though their exercise of autonomy when it comes to drinking is on balance bad for them. This suggests that autonomy has import not just as something good in

itself or as an instrument to other values. It has import as something to be respected; something you have reason to avoid degrading momentarily, even to ensure greater goods in the future. This point is of great import in political philosophy. It helps explain why states should not force or manipulate their citizens into doing what is in their own interests; this would violate their autonomy. In other words, it helps explain why state paternalism is wrong: paternalism disrespects autonomy.

It is not clear how Swaine's discussion connects to this aspect of autonomy's import. Swaine focuses on whether autonomy is good or bad on particular occasions. He thinks it is often bad, and so should not be vaunted. This focus would most sense were autonomy just something to be promoted. But since autonomy should be respected, then the fact that its exercise is occasionally bad does not sap it of moral import. After all, your alcoholic friend exercises their autonomy badly. Nonetheless it would be morally wrong to lock them up in order to dry them out. This would disrespect their autonomy. This facet of autonomy's import is, I've claimed, a politically crucial one; it helps explain the proper limits of the state. So, on the face of it, Swaine's critique of autonomy does not touch a crucial aspect of its import.

In sum, Swaine has provided an important exploration of some defects with autonomy. It leaves open some serious issues, but nonetheless merits much engagement.

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