

Principle of Autonomy

Principle of Autonomy

“We should respect the capacity of individuals to choose their own vision of the good life and act accordingly.”

[From the Greek *autos* (self) and *nomos* (law)]

Three Kinds of Autonomy

Liberty of Action

Autonomy as the “lack of external coercion” (i.e., force or the threat of force).

Freedom of Choice

Autonomy as the “availability of options” (e.g., having the resources for some action).

Effective Deliberation

Autonomy as the possession of information and the ability to process it effectively (i.e., to understand it). Here autonomy requires that the agent act “rationally” both in choosing the best means to the desired end, and in choosing the most appropriate ends.

Failing “Effective Deliberation”

- (1) **constitutional irrationality**: the agent may be immature, senile, etc.
- (2) **ephemeral irrationality**: the agent is under the influence of extreme emotion (such as fear or anger) or pain, or is feverish, or under the influence of certain drugs.
- (3) **lack of information**: here the agent may be acting rationally, but lacks the appropriate information or has been misinformed (intentionally or not) or in some manner deceived.

Interfering with “Liberty of Action”

Possible Reasons to Interfere:

- (1) **Harm Principle:** to protect others.
- (2) **Distributive Justice:** to re-allocate goods and services.
- (3) **Utility:** to benefit others.
- (4) **Paternalism:** to protect or benefit the agent.

Paternalism

Weak paternalism: if a person already lacks autonomy in the sense of **effective deliberation** then it is permissible to interfere with that person's liberty of action (e.g., restraining a confused or an inebriated person about to walk into traffic). The person's *goals* or *preferences* are accepted (e.g., health, avoidance of harm), but the *means* they have chosen are irrational (i.e., the means are unlikely to promote the goal).

Strong paternalism: a person's *goals or preferences* are rejected as irrational, and thus it is permissible to interfere with that person's liberty of action (e.g., a person who prefers to ride her motorcycle without a helmet, despite the added risks of injury, might be interfered with by the strong paternalist).

Autonomy and Informed Consent

The principle of autonomy suggests that a patient may not be treated without that patient's **informed consent**, and this must meet the following criteria:

Disclosure of Information: the patient is told the risks, harms/benefits, and alternatives to the course of action (autonomy as “effective deliberation”).

Understanding: the information is given in a way understandable by the relevant parties (autonomy as “effective deliberation”).

Mental Competence: the patient must be mentally competent (autonomy as “effective deliberation”).

Voluntary Consent: the consent is granted without coercion or fraud. (autonomy as “liberty of action” and as “freedom of choice”)