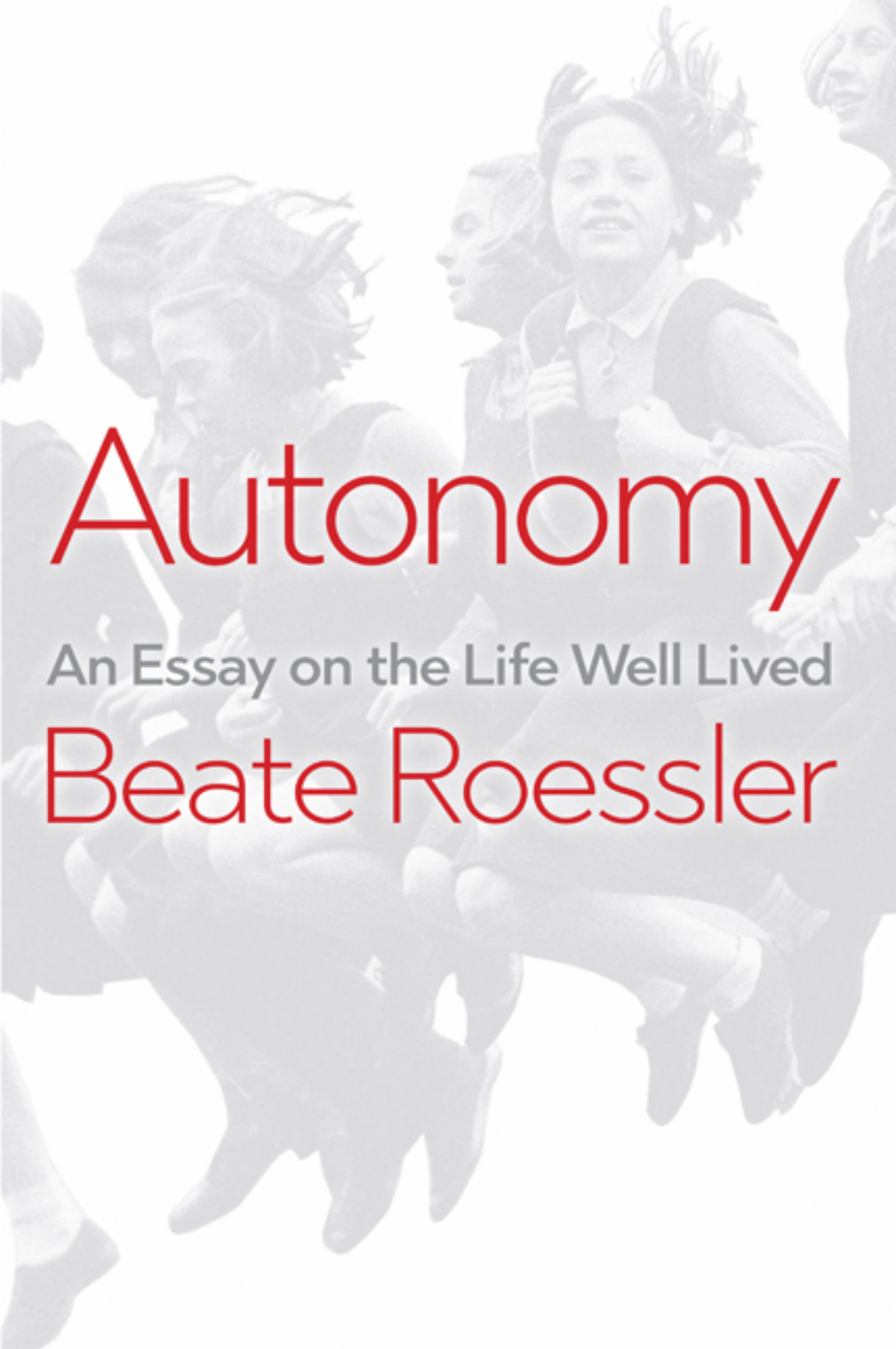

Autonomy

An Essay on the Life Well Lived

Beate Roessler

Autonomy

In everyday life, we generally assume that we can make our own decisions on matters which concern our own lives. We assume that a life followed only according to decisions taken by other people, against our will, cannot be a well-lived life – we assume, in other words, that we are and should be autonomous. However, it is equally true that many aspects of our lives are not chosen freely: this is true of social relations and commitments but also of all those situations we simply seem to stumble into, situations which just seem to happen to us. The possibility of both the success of an autonomous life and its failure are part of our everyday experiences.

In this brilliant and illuminating book, Beate Roessler examines the tension between failing and succeeding to live an autonomous life and the obstacles we have to face when we try to live our life autonomously, obstacles within ourselves as well as those that stem from social and political conditions. She highlights the ambiguities we encounter, examines the roles of self-awareness and self-deception, explores the role of autonomy for the meaning of life, and maps out the social and political conditions necessary for autonomy. Informed by philosophical perspectives but also drawing on literary texts, such as those of Siri Hustvedt and Jane Austen, and diaries, including those of Franz Kafka and Sylvia Plath, Roessler develops a formidable defense of autonomy against excessive expectations and, above all, against overpowering skepticism.

Beate Roessler is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam.

AUTONOMY

For Rebecca

"Me wherever my life is lived, O to be self-balanced for contingencies"

Walt Whitman, "Me Imperturbe"

Autonomy

An Essay on the Life Well Lived

Beate Roessler

Translated by James C. Wagner

polity

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Preface to the English Edition

Since the initial publication of my book on autonomy by Suhrkamp in 2017, I have had many opportunities to give lectures and take part in discussions about the propositions found in it – and I am enormously grateful to all the participants for their many suggestions and critical contributions. For the English translation, then, I was faced with the choice of either thoroughly reworking large parts of the book, incorporating the most recent literature, and thus almost writing a new book – or having the book translated and published in its original form, in full awareness of its shortcomings. I decided on the latter option, changing only a few details here and there, and I hope that I can nevertheless count on a similarly positive reaction to the one I was so happy to see the German edition receive.

I owe great thanks to the many bilingual friends and critics who read, commented on, and discussed the book and parts of the translation with me – including and especially those who helped to get the translation going. I only want to mention two here: Robert Pippin, who encouraged me enormously and at decisive moments; and Hannah Ginsborg, whose enthusiasm and whose assistance and support in discussing the translation of some of the more unwieldy words (like *Unhintergehbarkeit* or *Lebenslüge*) were a huge help.

At Polity, Elise Heslinga was always patient and endlessly helpful during these difficult pandemic times. I would also like to thank my translator James Wagner, who transformed my sometimes rather long sentences into shorter English units meticulously and with great dedication, and who tolerated my at times unhappy search for what I really wanted to express with an abundance of patience and persistence.

Finally, I am very grateful to Maarten van Tunen, whose bibliographical assistance with the many footnotes was invaluable.

Amsterdam, July 2020

Preface

This book is about the contradictions or tensions between our conception of ourselves as autonomous persons and our everyday experiences of a not particularly self-determined life. It is not a purely academic treatment but rather aims to be accessible also to readers who haven't studied philosophy but are interested in the idea of autonomy and the life well lived. Hence on the whole, I have tried to write this book differently than I would have were it only for my philosophical colleagues; this was certainly easier to manage in some chapters than in others. I also frequently use an inclusive "we," in the hope that I have in fact written this book for the people who may pick it up and find themselves in it.

I have been occupying myself with the problem of autonomy for many years now. During this time, I have had frequent opportunities to deliver lectures on the topics covered in this book. I profited greatly from the discussions that followed these talks, and I thank all those who participated for their critiques and suggestions. Particular gratitude is owed, however, to those friends and colleagues who read earlier versions of some of the chapters and those who patiently discussed numerous problems with me again and again: Joel Anderson, Katharina Bauer, Gijs van Donselaar, James Gledhill, Eva Groen-Reijman, Elisabeth Holzleithner, Naomi Kloosterboer, Thomas Nys, Andrew Roberts, Kati Röttger, Holmer Steinfath, and Henri Wijsbek. Their constructive comments were a great help to me.

I would also like to give special thanks to Robin Celikates and Stefan Gosepath, who were markedly consistent critical readers. They, along with Catriona Mackenzie and John Christman, belong to our autonomy workgroup, whose meetings and discussions were always highly instructive for me. My long conversations with Catriona Mackenzie about autonomy and the meaning of life – in Amsterdam and Sydney as well as in the Australian desert – also helped me immensely.

Thanks to my brothers, Martin Roessler and Johannes Roessler, for faithfully providing their respective expertise, and to Elke Rutzenhöfer for her advice as well as for her loyalty and friendship.

Large parts of this book were written in the Library of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam, which is a wonderfully quiet place to work, especially in the summer, and I owe great thanks to Lidie Koeneman for her quick assistance in cases of bibliographical emergency. Lara von Dehn helped me with technical details at the very beginning, but the lion's share of the editing of every chapter was carried out by Johannes Sudau – I am deeply grateful to him for his care and diligence. Finally, I would like to thank Eva Gilmer for her critical reading and numerous suggestions for improvements, and Philipp Hölzing for his patience as I was completing the book.

Amsterdam, December 2016

Introduction: Autonomy in Everyday Life

In liberal societies in the West, we generally assume that we are autonomous. We take it to be self-evident that we have the right to make autonomous choices and live a self-determined life. We believe that we are capable of living such a life, of reflecting on what we want to do and how we want to live, and then converting these thoughts into action. And we value this, for a heteronomous life – a life in which I would have to live and do existentially important things against my own will and my own choices – could never be a good, well-lived life.

Autonomy has long been a fundamental theme of philosophy, especially since Kant. The contemporary theory landscape thus features, on one side, normative theories that describe in detail the conditions – frequently idealized – under which an autonomous life is possible, including, of course, theories that declare leading an autonomous life to be utterly unproblematic. On the other side, however, we find fundamental doubts about the possibility and meaning of autonomy, for instance in positions that seek to establish that leading an autonomous life is impossible by demonstrating just how much each and every one of us is dependent on circumstances and relations that we do not choose ourselves. So, while autonomy is morally and legally fundamental to our societies, what exactly this means for our lives remains largely unclear. It is therefore a pressing question how to develop and substantiate a plausible concept of autonomy between the detailed normative theories and their defenders, on the one hand, and the fundamental skeptics, on the other. Interestingly, both normative concept and fundamental skepticism can be described from the perspective of the autonomous person herself – at which point we are dealing no longer with two opposing theories but with *the tension between our normative understanding of ourselves and our everyday experience*.

Although we most often proceed from the assumption that it is possible to lead a self-determined life, there are countless

situations and aspects of our lives that we precisely did not choose for ourselves, in which we ask ourselves how it could come to this, in which we decide that fate or, more simply, our own carelessness is to blame. The possibility that we succeed or fail in shaping our own lives is part of our everyday experience. Nevertheless, there are very different reasons why this *tension* is connected with the idea of autonomy. On the one hand, we can describe this tension as that between the individual pursuit of self-determination and events that have always already happened, that simply occur and seem to present us with accomplished facts. On the other hand, it is more specifically a tension that concerns our embeddedness in social relationships and the resulting obligations and demands of others from which we cannot and do not want to free ourselves, but which nonetheless can often be subjectively understood as a failure of autonomy.[1]

In this book, I shall take up a range of different perspectives to consider these various forms of conflict between the possibility and the impossibility of self-determination, between the idea of self-determination and everyday experience. As a normative ideal, individual self-determination or autonomy is constitutive of our self-understanding and of our understanding of the law and politics – individual self-determination at least in the sense that we can think about what we really want in life, that we can relate reflectively to our own desires and beliefs. The fact that we often cannot achieve this kind of autonomy in our everyday lives, why and in what contexts this is the case, and why this difficulty nevertheless changes nothing about the necessity and persuasive power of autonomy: these are the major themes of this book.

The tension between our pursuit of autonomy and our everyday experiences can be illustrated and clarified through literature. For precisely when it comes to understanding the phenomenology of our everyday entanglements, literary texts can often be of greater help to us than philosophy. The writer I would first like to consult is Iris Murdoch, who was both an author and a philosopher:[2]

> It's not like that. One doesn't just look and choose and see where one might go, one's sunk in one's life up to the neck, or I am. You can't swim about in a swamp or a quicksand. It's when things happen to me that I know what I evidently wanted, not before! I can see when there's no way back. It's a muddle, I don't even understand it myself.[3]

This call for help out of the chaos of life, this wrestling with the idea of whether one can determine one's own life, is a central theme of Murdoch's novels. The reality that we are always already up to our necks in it is, she writes, "basically incomprehensible." Elsewhere, Murdoch opines: "The message is – everything is contingent. There

are no deep foundations. Our life rests on chaos and rubble, and all we can try to do is be good."[4]

Chaos and rubble are the opposite of self-determination and justifiability. This is, first and foremost, a reference to the fateful coincidences that frequently plunge Murdoch's protagonists, ominously and hopelessly, into the tangled disorder of life. These contingencies give expression to the impossibility of planning out one's own life. We experience them as an overwhelming power, as circumstances that confront us over the course of our lives that we simply have to accept. This is the first tension that I described above, that between the idea of self-determination and the feeling that we are always presented with accomplished facts. Murdoch has in mind here not so much the contingencies of birth and ancestry but those of the social entanglements that we are confronted with in the course of our adult life in the form of unforeseen, unfortunate events or undesired consequences of our own actions that we were unable to predict and therefore often experience as acts of fate.

Let us consider, for example, Hilary Burde, the protagonist of Murdoch's novel *A Word Child*. Hilary comes from poor, even miserable circumstances but is able to work his way up thanks to his exceptional talent for languages, becoming a student at Oxford, winning every possible prize, writing a brilliant final exam, and being made a fellow at one of the university's colleges. Then he falls in love with Anne Jopling, the wife of his benefactor and doctoral supervisor. The two have a passionate affair that ends with a car accident caused by Hilary, in which Anne dies. Of course, Hilary has to give up his position at the college. Twenty years later – dull years spent leading a sad life as a minor civil servant at a nondescript government office in London – he runs into his former doctoral adviser Jopling, who has since remarried. Once again, entirely against his own intentions, Hilary falls in love with Jopling's wife Kitty. Once again there are intimate encounters that, once again, end with an accident and the woman's death.

Murdoch, writing in Hilary's voice, describes why this is interesting in the context of being skeptical about the possibility of planning out one's own life: "Yet such things happen to men, lives are thus ruined, thus tainted and darkened and irrevocably spoilt, wrong turnings are taken and persisted in, and those who make one mistake wreck all the rest out of frenzy, even out of pique."[5]

The events with which Hilary is confronted are almost exaggeratedly fateful. They seem to be entirely out of his hands, contingencies that make a determinable life, a self-determined life, impossible because it is utterly unclear what autonomous, authentic decisions would actually look like under such catastrophic conditions, what acting with plans and goals would even mean. "Yet such things

happen to men" – and things that happen to us are the exact opposite of those aspects of life that we determine ourselves.

Fate, however – and Murdoch suggests this, too – is not such a simple matter. "The strange thing about fate," the philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear writes, "is that it does not fit neatly on either side of the me/not-me divide."[6] That is, the extent to which such events are not *also* due to our own actions, our own complex, difficult identities, remains unsettlingly open. Hilary's repetition compulsion, for example, may be attributable to his own obsessions to a far greater degree than he recognizes or would like to recognize. And in any case, these extraordinary coincidences – the love affairs, the tragic accidents, the catastrophic repetitions – are only one side of the coin. The other, more important form of contingency – or bad planning – is the utterly common and familiar one that entangles and binds the protagonists in different and instructive ways in their own personal, ordinary chaos, their totally normal daily lives. Above all, it is the everyday problem of dealing thoughtfully and sensibly with our own decisions, intentions, possible choices, social relationships, and social obligations that throws a skeptical light on the scope of self-determination.

This "fatalistic feeling of helplessness," as Murdoch calls it, is especially clear in the case of one of her other unfortunate protagonists, John Rainborough, another midlevel civil servant in a dubious public administration job, from the novel *The Flight from the Enchanter*:

> Rainborough was sitting in his drawing-room trying to make up his mind to telephone Agnes Casement. He had promised to ring her during the afternoon, but had kept putting it off. It was now becoming, in equal degrees, both essential and impossible that he should do so at once; and as he meditated upon this, turning it into a problem of metaphysical dimensions, it gave him the image of his whole life. For Rainborough was now engaged to be married to Agnes Casement. How this thing had happened was not very clear to Rainborough. Yet it was, he was determined to think, quite inevitable. That much was certain. Must face up to my responsibilities, said Rainborough vaguely to himself as he contemplated the telephone. Need ballast. All this wandering about no good. Must root myself in life. Children and so on. Marriage just what I need. Must have courage to define myself. Naturally, it's painful. But best thing really. That's my road, I knew it all along.[7]

Rainborough's reflections come too late. He is already stuck in a muddle that he isn't entirely sure how he got into. His fatalistic feeling of helplessness leads him to *ex post* rationalizations ("Must root myself in life. Children and so on. Marriage just what I need.")

that are of course not particularly authentic because they only feign decisions and desires that are not actually entirely his own. Rainborough evidently knows that he must act, that he has to determine his life *through* these very social relationships. But he does not do so. It has always already been too late.

Now one might argue that this merely demonstrates a lack of reflection and good sense, a simple failure on the part of Murdoch's middle-class or lower-middle-class agents. These are people who fail because they do not even meet the standard that they themselves very well *could* meet. This standard of reflection and having good reasons for acting, of decisiveness and strength of will, is by no means too demanding. Basically every moderately sensible person could live up to it, and if they don't, that's their own fault. These are agents who don't know themselves well enough, although they could if they put in sufficient effort, actors who are alienated from themselves, not one with themselves, not authentic – although they could be.

But this argument falls short, or at least does not get at the whole truth. For the true-to-life entanglements of Murdoch's protagonists demonstrate that confronting the contingencies and social complications that arise in our own lives can indeed lead to justified doubts about our ability to determine our lives ourselves. It is precisely the ordinariness of these characters and their experiences that casts doubt on the prospect of self-determination. For if my life is defined not by my decisions or my actions but by contingency and indeterminacy, by the social ties and relationships that I am always already entangled in, then it becomes difficult to believe that *my own* reasoning and *my own* actions can be decisive factors in my life. The abysses into which Murdoch's protagonists often fall, along with the melancholy apathy that goes hand in hand with their doubts about the use or point of life and their ability to determine their own lives, make it clear that lived everyday experiences – whether autonomous or precisely not – have a phenomenology and plausibility all their own, one that for the most part is better described by authors of fiction than through contrived – at times downright clumsy – philosophical examples. That is why I will continue to draw on examples from literature in the ensuing chapters.

Despite all of these illuminating descriptions of the non-self-determined aspects of everyday life, however, it is also clear that, in important dimensions of life, self-determination remains our guiding principle – this is the only reason why we and Iris Murdoch can even describe the failure of self-determination as such. It is only in contrast to the normative idea of autonomy that contingencies, obligations, psychological inabilities, and structural obstacles can be characterized as such. Autonomy, I want to argue, has value and significance for us because it is constitutive of our ability to

shape ourselves and the world and adopt them as our own. Yet ambivalence, self-alienation, our own inscrutability to ourselves, and structures that impede or obstruct autonomy are all part of our autonomously lived everyday experience – and this is precisely why we are confronted here with tensions.

Personal autonomy, however, also has a decidedly political side. As the Lebanese author Samir Frangieh explains:

> I believe that the most important phenomenon that we have witnessed during the revolutions is the rediscovery of personal autonomy. In other words: people are conscious that they can become the makers of their own history. In fact, this is rather new in a region where for decades the individual has been reduced to groups, groups to parties representing them, and parties representing them to their leader. As a result, we found ourselves in a situation in which entire countries were reduced to one person. Examples are Assad's Syria and the entire Arab world, which was merely defined by 10 names. We are talking about 500 million people here, reduced to between 10 and 15 names. This is precisely what the Arab Spring has changed.[8]

This political side of personal autonomy still proves to be explosive, not just as a call for change in non-democratic countries but also within liberal-democratic societies: when the limits placed on government encroachments on personal autonomy become structurally compromised, when rights have only formal rather than any material validity, when intrusions by the state threaten to undermine personal autonomy. Such intrusions include government surveillance operations and other violations of informational privacy, as well as social structures, such as patriarchy, that can impede autonomy. This makes it clear that political conditions secure not only negative freedom but positive freedom as well, and that only if both together can ensure autonomy. Therefore the relation between freedom and autonomy will also play an important role in this book.

What I am primarily interested in pursuing in the following chapters, however, is the problem of individual autonomy in everyday life, the side of individual experience and individual capability. We can call this an *ethical* question as it concerns the possibility of leading an autonomous, well-lived life. I use the term "ethics" here in the broad (Aristotelian) sense that Bernard Williams and others have refamiliarized us with, which deals with questions not only of morality but also of the good life. In later chapters, however, I will also take into account the social and political side of autonomy, which shows how the idea of personal autonomy both is made possible and at the same time can be threatened by social and political conditions.

At this point, I should briefly introduce the various perspectives

that I will take up in this book regarding the problem of autonomy. How is the idea of autonomy to be understood, and what tradition is it a part of? In chapter 1, I want to address *conceptual issues* and elucidate in what sense autonomy is related to individual freedom, what capacities we should ascribe to an autonomous person, and what the limiting cases of such ascriptions are. We will also see that we are only ever autonomous together with others.

Are autonomous action and autonomous reflection necessarily free of any *ambivalence*? Must an autonomous person always be able to say, "Here I stand, I can do no other"? I consider the problem of the ambivalent person in chapter 2, in which I hope to make clear that ambivalence is by no means always a threat to our autonomy. On the contrary, it is a natural part of our self-determined – and rational – everyday life.

In chapter 3, I ask why autonomy is in fact so valuable and important. I pose this question as the question of the relationship between autonomy and *the meaning of life*. Is a life meaningful only if it is autonomous? And can it be meaningful – and autonomous – without being happy? Must it be objectively meaningful, or is it enough if it can be understood as autonomous and subjectively meaningful? Here again, I shall draw on literary examples in order to better understand these tensions or contradictions and to demonstrate the constitutive connection between self-determination and meaning in one's own life.

Persons who act autonomously know what they think and know what they want. That is, in order for individuals to be able to act and live autonomously, they must know themselves. But how – after Freud – can we demand self-transparency as a condition of autonomy? Chapter 4 considers the question of what form of *self-awareness* and *self-knowledge* we can reasonably attribute to an autonomous person, given the widespread phenomenon of self-deception. I also discuss whether or not new "self-tracking technologies" are in fact capable of contributing to self-knowledge and thus promoting autonomy.

I take up a different perspective on the tensions in our autonomously lived everyday lives in chapter 5. In the course of interpreting selected passages from various *diaries* and blogs, I investigate whether the process of reflection that I earlier described as characteristic of autonomy can be found in such writings in exemplary form. If we accept the premise that at least the classic diary is a paradigmatic space of everyday confrontation with one's own life, then such accounts should be able to help us show what autonomy actually means in everyday life. And looking at modern blogs and vlogs, we can further ask whether this form of confronting one's own autonomy has changed within and through these new media.

The focus of chapter 6 is the question of the relation between

autonomy and *the good life*. Is post-Kantian moral philosophy capable of developing a substantive theory of the good life at all? Is it ethically defensible to create standards to judge whether a life is good or well lived? With the aid of the concept of alienation and an analysis of why it is that autonomous choice is so critical for the good, autonomous life, I want to probe whether we can make critical statements about the good life without at the same time casting doubt on the autonomy of those who have chosen it or in any case live it.

Chapter 7, on the relation between *autonomy and privacy*, concerns the ethical as well as the political question of the necessity of protecting individual privacy if living an autonomous life is to be possible. I would like to consider the question of why a free, autonomous – and well-lived – life is dependent on the protection of privacy, and why we cannot and do not want to imagine a life lived only in the public sphere. Why would a society where privacy was no longer respected be suffocating and unfree?

In chapter 8, I discuss more generally the necessary *preconditions* of individual autonomy, the *political and social* conditions that are required if one is to be able to live an autonomous life. My focus here is the relation between individual autonomy and the conditions associated with a liberal-democratic social order. I want to show that there is no necessary, direct connection between these liberal-democratic prerequisites and the possibility of an autonomous life. One important question in this context is how to best analyze the dual nature or Janus-faced character of social conditions that are capable of both *enabling* and structurally *impeding* autonomy. Here I will therefore also discuss the problems of structural oppression and discrimination as well as the question of whether people with "false consciousness" or "adaptive preferences" can be considered autonomous.

I said at the outset that in western liberal societies we take it to be self-evident that we can live autonomously. In chapter 9, at the end of our journey through the many tensions of the autonomously lived everyday life and the difficulties of achieving a life well lived, I defend my argument for the idea of autonomy by spelling out the *self-understanding* of such a notion against those critics who deem *neither free will nor personal autonomy* – nor moral responsibility – to even be possible. I shall not refute these theories, but I want to show what the price of denying the possibility of autonomy would be. Since throughout this book I take autonomy to be possible at least in principle, it will be useful to conclude with an attempt to defend the reality of autonomy one last time against this fundamental skepticism.

The different topics covered in these chapters each require a different approach. Some must be discussed against the backdrop

of recent, at times rather complicated, philosophical debates; this is less the case for other questions, such as how to interpret autonomy in diaries. Writing about the autonomous life means at the same time writing about the possibility of a life well lived. This is my thesis, which I seek to substantiate sometimes explicitly, but for the most part implicitly, in the ensuing chapters. In the process, I define autonomy as a necessary but not sufficient condition of a life well lived. And I shall *not* begin by outlining a specific theory of autonomy or of the well-lived life that I then apply to everyday situations in order to see whether we are in fact autonomous here. I instead take the opposite path, offering only a general clarification of concepts before looking at different problems and contexts involving autonomy along with the various ways in which autonomy can fail. Along the way, a theory of personal autonomy in fact emerges, but in a sense surreptitiously. I would like to close with a remark on terminology: I speak of a "life well lived" only when it is not merely autonomous but also meaningful and happy.[9] Philosophical texts tend to speak primarily of the *good* life – and the pursuit of the good life as a happy life. I opt not to use this terminology because the good life (at least in the literature) can also be one that is not self-determined, and it is important to me to make clear this potential difference between the good life and a life well lived. To complicate the matter a bit further: a life can be meaningful, but not happy, as meaning is more in our own hands than happiness is. And young children, for example, can have a good, happy life that is, however, not self-determined and, because it has not yet been reflected upon, not meaningful (although it certainly is for others). This will all become clear in the course of the chapters that follow.

I develop this theory, as I have said, little by little – but not with the goal of, having it now in hand, indicating the precise conditions of a life well lived, as in a self-help book. I am rather far more interested in the tension between our understanding of ourselves as autonomous persons and our experience that this autonomy, for a variety of different reasons and in a number of different respects, often fails. And I am also interested in what both – the autonomy and the tension – mean for successfully leading a well-lived life.

1

What is Autonomy? A Conceptual Approach

> Now it looks as if I am the victim of my own virtuosity. But then what? What would I have done? Become a flautist after all? How will I ever find out? No-one can start at the same point twice over. If an experiment can't be replicated, it ceases to be an experiment. No-one can experiment with their life. No-one can be blamed for being in the dark.[1]

> That fall there had been some discussion of death. Our deaths. Franklin being eighty-three years old and myself seventy-one at the time, we had naturally made plans for our funerals (none) and for the burials (immediate) in a plot already purchased. We had decided against cremation, which was popular with our friends. It was just the actual dying that had been left out or up to chance.[2]

Autonomy is important to us because we can only take responsibility for our lives and for individual actions when we have determined them – mostly – ourselves, when it is emphatically our own actions that we perform, our own plans that we pursue, our own designs that we strive to implement. If we were manipulated or coerced, then we could not act on the basis of our own reasons. Then it would not be our own values and convictions that form the framework of our actions and intentions. What is more, we could not see ourselves as being responsible for our lives as our own, and we might then feel alienated from ourselves. Before examining all of these aspects more closely, I would first like to ask in a general sense: What is autonomy? The present chapter will briefly (1) situate the concept historically before (2) more precisely clarifying the relationship between autonomy and freedom. Drawing on this, and in light of recent debates around the concept of individual autonomy, I will then explain what "autonomy as a capability" means, thus (3) delineating the framework within which the idea of autonomy as it is discussed in this book can be more precisely located. Finally (4), I

will offer a cursory description of the open questions that will have to be answered in the ensuing chapters.

Remarks on the history of the concept

In liberal-democratic societies, the value of autonomy has by now become so self-evident that Joseph Raz calls it a *fact of life*: "The value of personal autonomy is a fact of life. Since we live in a society whose social forms are to a considerable extent based on individual choice, and since our options are limited by what is available in our society, we can prosper in it only if we can be successfully autonomous."[3] Autonomy is thus a *fact of life* because since the Enlightenment this idea has become more and more established as a fundamental value and civil liberty in, as well as a basic precondition or even value of, liberal-democratic societies. Raz's argument is that we can only lead a *well-lived* life when we also lead an *autonomous* life. For a life *well lived* can only be a life that we ourselves want to live, that we ourselves determine, that we have made our own. Robert Pippin makes a similar argument, namely that a direct connection can be drawn between individual autonomy and the meaning of life – people evidently experience their lives as meaningful when they are able to determine their own lives themselves as much as possible and in fundamental ways. This seems to me to be an essential argument for the idea and the value of autonomy, hence I will discuss this connection in greater detail in a separate chapter.[4] Autonomy is thus evidently a value that has also been established as a right in liberal-democratic societies. We *value* autonomy – but what actually is it that we value?

In a general sense, individual autonomy means our ability or capacity to make the laws according to which we act and that we ourselves consider correct. This idea famously goes back to Kant,[5] and ever since autonomy has played a central role in ethics and political philosophy. In Kant's practical philosophy, autonomy as self-legislation means that the will itself creates the moral law according to which human beings are to conduct themselves. Hence the autonomy of the moral law is an expression of practical reason, which categorically dictates behavior and thus places full responsibility for an individual action on the individual herself. Accordingly, for Kant, autonomy is essentially not only a rational but first and foremost a moral concept: we are autonomous and free if, and only if, we are moral and act morally.[6]

Autonomy is also a categorical concept for Kant because all people possess autonomy by virtue of their reason; differences of degree are neither necessary nor possible here. The concept of autonomy corresponds to that of the individual's dignity, which

must be respected – no less categorically – in every person. Now there are two histories to be written of the concept of autonomy since Kant: one in which Hegel, as he himself claims, was the first to do justice to the idea of autonomy and free it of the paradoxes in which it remained entangled in Kant; and one which leads from Kant to Mill and on up to more recent debates, particularly in analytic philosophy.[7] In terms of content, there are a number of points of contact between these two traditions, and I will come back to them repeatedly throughout this book. The analytic tradition, however, is often seen as being more detailed and less abstract, and so I will take my bearings primarily from this one, although without losing sight of the other.

Since Mill, the concept of autonomy, or in his work especially that of individuality, has aimed no longer exclusively at moral autonomy but in a broader sense at individual liberty, personal autonomy.[8] While positions that draw principally on Kant, e.g. those of Christine Korsgaard, do continue to play an important role in contemporary debates, most current conceptions of autonomy proceed from a general idea of personal rather than only or fundamentally from a concept of moral autonomy. Incidentally, Korsgaard also wants to do justice to the idea that we always possess a variety of practical identities – i.e. that we have personal as well as moral autonomy – which must be understood as being specific to individual roles and always embedded in social contexts. However, she argues that the most fundamental of all these practical identities remains our moral identity, which serves as the basis and the source of our normative obligations.

This distinction between personal and moral autonomy has rightly become well established. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that we can find a concept of *personal* autonomy even in Kant and, conversely, that contemporary ideas of personal autonomy draw upon the same qualities and abilities that form the essence of Kantian *moral* autonomy. Kant himself, with a view to the duty of human beings to "increase" both their physical and spiritual perfections, argues in *The Metaphysics of Morals*:

> [w]hich of these natural perfections should take precedence, and in what proportion one against the other it may be a human being's duty to himself to make these natural perfections his end, are matters left for him to choose *in accordance with his own rational reflection about what sort of life he would like to lead* and whether he has the powers necessary for it (e.g., whether it should be a trade, commerce, or a learned profession).[9]

This in fact sounds like one of the examples used in analytical debates about personal autonomy: What should I do with my life?

What sort of life should I lead? Thus, in some respects, the difference between Kant's concept of autonomy and contemporary notions of personal autonomy is not as clear as it initially seems.

Now in recent years debates about personal autonomy have become highly differentiated and specialized. First, drawing on Kant (and as frequently and rightly found in the literature), it is reasonable to describe autonomy *categorically* as an attribute belonging to every person *as* a person. Beyond this, however, and contrary to Kant's position, it also makes sense to describe autonomy as a capacity one may possess to varying degrees. Autonomy in a categorical sense, then, is attributable to individuals who in principle possess the unqualified ability to act autonomously and thus cannot be attributed to, say, small children or coma patients. Individuals are therefore considered to be autonomous above a certain threshold. *Beyond* this threshold, however, people may be capable of autonomy to greater or lesser degrees, i.e. we are speaking here of a graduated concept. In the first, categorical sense, autonomy serves as the basis of, for example, one's right to defend oneself against paternalistic interventions by the state or other individuals, while debates surrounding the idea of personal autonomy in recent years have aimed to establish a concept of autonomy that can be attributed *in varying degrees* to *autonomous* individuals. I will return to this in greater detail below.

Mill's concern was that we should be able to lead our personal lives as we want, without hindrances or constraints, so long as we are not harming anyone else. "The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it."[10] *Our own good in our own way* – this is the hallmark of modern individual freedom, which when in doubt discards tradition and convention, asking only: How do I want to live? What kind of person do I want to be? Mill certainly saw himself as an opponent of Kant, arguing that if we did not wish to choose and live our lives ourselves – freely – then we would have

> no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. [. . .] A person whose desires and impulses are his own – are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture – is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character.[11]

Therefore only people who are free, who "choose for themselves," who need and make use of all of their abilities and thus have *character*, truly do justice to human possibilities. This is a concept of personal liberty that clearly goes far beyond the idea of moral

autonomy.[12] Mill speaks here primarily of individual liberty, and only rarely of autonomy, but current theories that draw on Mill frequently use the term autonomy in this context.

Negative freedom, positive freedom, autonomy

What, then, is the connection between freedom and autonomy? Philosophical usage of these two terms is not always clear, and the relation between them is disputed. Some authors identify liberty with autonomy, while others maintain that there is an important difference. As I would now like to show, autonomy should be conceived of as the concretization of a properly understood concept of freedom.[13]

The conceptual distinction between negative and positive freedom is famously found in an extraordinarily influential essay by Isaiah Berlin, though the idea of such a distinction is actually much older, appearing in a similar form, for example, in Benjamin Constant. Negative freedom as Berlin defines it refers to conceptions of freedom as essentially the absence of obstacles and restrictions, as seen in classic liberal approaches by the likes of Hobbes, Locke, and Mill. Purely negative conceptions can also be found in contemporary theories of freedom, as when Hayek describes freedom as "that condition of men in which coercion of some by others is reduced as much as is possible in society."[14] In contrast to such purely formal, negative concepts of freedom as the absence of coercion, positive conceptions view freedom as the ability to pursue certain options, realize certain abilities, or lead a self-determined life. In any event, then, positive freedom prima facie means that individuals have control over their ability to choose what they themselves consider to be meaningful options for themselves, to do what they believe expresses their true self or the kind of person they wish to be.

Berlin, however, precisely wants to show what problems may be linked with such a notion of freedom, arguing, for example, that it might lead to the question of what represents a "meaningful option" being decided in terms of collective self-determination, with this collective decision then overriding the will and the negative liberty of the *individual person*. This would imply that the collective knows what is best for the individual, and not individuals themselves. Positive liberty, in this case, rests not on the autonomy of the acting subject but on a collective autonomy such as that developed by Rousseau, and on the idea that others may know better what makes me free than I do myself.[15] For Berlin, all positive conceptions that see freedom exclusively in the realization of certain options potentially end in paternalistic or even dictatorial theories (and societies). Hence he clearly sees the negative concept of freedom as superior

to the positive. Only negative freedom represents the kind of liberal freedom that allows individuals themselves to decide how they want to live their freedom.

Charles Taylor, however, demonstrated early on that these two concepts of freedom need not be mutually exclusive, arguing that we can speak about the absence of obstacles – Which are more important? Why do we not want precisely these restrictions? – only if we also have some idea of what we actually want with our freedom. Thus it is neither sensible nor possible to draw a clear boundary between negative and positive freedom. The former always points to the latter (and vice versa) or, in Taylor's terminology, negative opportunity-concepts always point to positive concepts of self-realization.[16]

We value negative freedom because we want to be free to do *certain things*, to be a *certain person*, to lead our lives, as Mill says, *in our own way*. A negative concept of freedom is not sufficient to explain this, however. If we now consider positive liberty, we will see that, in order to be called free, we also need good or in any case desirable options, worthwhile opportunities to live our negative liberty. Freedom from obstacles, being able to decide between five equally bad or banal and undesirable options, may suffice for a value-neutral definition of liberty and choice, but it does not adequately explain what we mean when we talk about freedom, its meaning, and its value *for us*.[17]

Hence, in order to take a further step in the direction of autonomy, it will be helpful to look at a second critique of Berlin, this one from Gerald MacCallum, who argues that every concept of freedom necessarily incorporates *three* elements that different conceptions interpret differently only in terms of their relation to each other.[18] Thus even negative and positive liberty remain incomplete if they do not take these three elements into account in equal measure. MacCallum illustrates this with the formula "*x* is free from *y* to do *z*."[19] While element *y* negatively refers to the absence of obstacles, *z* shows that we always conceive of freedom positively because we want to have certain courses of action available to us. A complete concept of liberty, however, also includes a third element, *x*, the free, determining subject, which can also be variously defined. MacCallum argues that these three elements are always implicitly or explicitly assumed in every notion of freedom, and only together do they constitute a full concept of freedom, its meaning, and its value for us.

But even this conception is not yet sufficient for determining the relationship between autonomy and freedom. For if I am persuaded – or, even more strongly, subtly manipulated – into making a certain decision, this might not necessarily be described as restricting my negative liberty, and perhaps the option I was persuaded to choose