

The value of authenticity-based autonomy in medical ethics

Abstract

The notion of respect for autonomy dominates bioethical discussion, though what qualifies precisely as autonomous action is notoriously elusive. I will suggest that the concepts of autonomy that are frequently invoked or appealed to in bioethics have, in recent years, coalesced into two broad yet importantly distinct concepts. The first, endorsed and developed by theoretical philosophers and action theorists, is built around a notion of authenticity; preferences or desires count as autonomous if they bear some sort of special relationship to the 'self'. The self here is generally understood as broadly Lockean, that is, as comprised of enduring values, desires and other psychological elements. The second concept of autonomy, developed with a focus on practical situations, rejects authenticity as a condition of autonomy on the grounds that this unacceptably restricts the decisions that count as autonomous. Instead, proponents of this notion emphasize intentionality, understanding and freedom from controlling influences as the necessary conditions of autonomy.

The distinction between these two notions has recently been recognized, and has led to calls to excise the first, authenticity-based notion of autonomy from bioethics, and focus instead on the second notion. I will argue that such a move is misguided. Both models of autonomy have essential insights to offer in biomedical contexts, but each also contains significant drawbacks. I will argue that in most situations in biomedical ethics, an inclusive authenticity-free standard of autonomy will provide the most appropriate basis for informed consent guidelines. However, in very high risk situations, that are likely to have significant implications on the future of the agent, a Lockean notion of authenticity is essential to establish the authority of the agent to make decisions on behalf of her distant future self over the authority of others. This forms a crucial means of protection against the paternalistic intersubjective judgments that are risk influencing judgments about whether the individual qualifies as autonomous when the stakes are high.