

Andrew Sneddon's *Autonomy*
(Bloomsbury, 2013)

Andrew Jason Cohen

This is a rich and denser book than expected. It nicely integrates discussion of what autonomy is (chapters two through four) with discussion of why autonomy is of value and how that matters (chapters five through eight). It is comparable to Gerald Dworkin's *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*. In contrast to Dworkin's book, it is meant "to introduce upper-level undergraduates and postgraduates to" autonomy while developing "a particular viewpoint ... designed to appeal to researchers" (<http://www.bloomsbury.com/us/series/bloomsbury-ethics/>).

One of the book's nicest features is the inclusion of reading guides helpful for those seeking to learn more about the topic. Another clear positive is the use of well-designed vignette's to elucidate various intuitions. This is not uncommon, of course, but Sneddon uses them with such frequency that it stands out.

While the reading guides and examples are helpful, Sneddon's manner of signposting isn't. Consider: "There are two things that we might mean when we speak of some value being relevant everywhere. First, we might strictly mean ... Less strictly, we might mean ... let's give the name 'issue-omni-relevance' to this first notion" (178). Until those last two words, I read the strict and less strict meanings as the "two things that we might mean." They are, though, merely variants of the first. Combined with extensive distinctions and neologisms, this makes the book less readable than it ought to be. A final general point: the timing of the book is somewhat unfortunate as Sneddon couldn't refer to Sarah Conly's *Against Autonomy* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) or the Michael Garnett-Steven Weimer debate in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 2014 (92:1).

Sneddon begins with a four-way distinction—and two neologisms—on page 3. Where autonomy is self-rule and heteronomy is rule by another person, "cosmonomy" is rule by non-personal elements of the world and "oudenonomy" is rule by nothing. We are then

provided a three-way distinction between personal autonomy, political autonomy (i.e., state sovereignty), and moral autonomy (the ability to choose “on the basis of moral assessment” or the ability to determine one’s own moral standards). Personal autonomy is more or less what we might call “positive liberty”—“the power to determine the course of your life” (5). Personal autonomy, though, can be local—about individual choices—or global—about our personhood. Sneddon renders this distinction as one between autonomy of choice and autonomy of persons. That final distinction is the important one for the rest of the book.

Sneddon argues that “[t]he central characteristic of autonomy of choice is the thought-about-thought structure emphasized by the hierarchical theory” of autonomy (21). A “first-order thought counts as autonomous,” he argues, “when it stands in the appropriate sorts of relations to higher-order thoughts” (27). The intuition is simple enough: if one’s acts are not in accord with the mass of one’s desires, we would doubt the act is genuinely the individual’s and so doubt her autonomy. I likely chose autonomously, e.g., “when my first-order choice to ... buy ice cream is accepted (somehow) by higher-order processes” (24). This view has intuitive appeal, but it also seems that *how the choice comes about* matters. Hence, while Sneddon thinks that tea-lover Farrah chooses a specific tea autonomously even if she would not have tried it absent unrequested intervention by a benevolent neuroscientist (37), her choice seems to me not autonomous even if it is “autonomy-friendly” (as Sneddon says of “Xavier” on 40). I think this is an instance of the hierarchical model *not* fitting with the authenticity condition—contrary to Sneddon’s view (25-26).

Autonomy of persons, Sneddon argues, “includes autonomy of choices but also involves other capacities” (19). In particular, “self-knowledge and self-shaping are needed” (49). To explicate the former, he makes use of D. T. Meyers’ five-fold conception of the self (50 ff); to explicate the latter, he makes use of Charles Taylor’s concept of strong evaluation (60ff). Importantly, he tells us that “to shape oneself is to make autonomous decisions about ... oneself” and that this “is at the heart of autonomy of personhood” (59). This is plausible—and probably right. That isn’t to say there aren’t difficulties that need careful attention or that Sneddon’s further conclusions are all correct. To take one example, he claims that if

she uses strong evaluation to autonomously choose to become a slave, "Gillian is an autonomous slave. Her subservience is an expression of her deeply considered and chosen values. She is an autonomous person with regard to her slavery" (69). I would think that while she *was* (previously) an autonomous person and autonomously chose slavery, doing so was choosing *not* to be an autonomous person. Saying she is autonomous "with regard to her slavery" seems like a matter of the choice, not personhood.

As important as it is to explain what autonomy is, it is also important to defend its *possibility*. Sneddon discusses general factors thought to prevent autonomy in chapter four. He concentrates—for good reason—on determinism, neuroscience (especially the finding that our actions precede the brain activity correlated with the choice to take those actions), and social psychology (namely the finding that our social context highly correlates with our actions). These have all been thought to rule out free will and, unsurprisingly, some think they similarly limit autonomy. Sneddon nicely dispels such ideas before moving on to normative issues.

In Chapter 5, Sneddon discusses some general arguments for the value of autonomy. There are more in the literature, of course, but Sneddon does a great job with those he considers. One of the arguments he seems to think strongest, though, strikes me as unpersuasive. He discusses "Jenny," who wishes to lead—and thinks she deserves—a heteronomous life (97 ff). Jenny ostensibly values heteronomy. The problem, Sneddon seems to think, is that when she values someone else controlling her, she must value their being able to control their own life—i.e., valuing heteronomy for oneself requires valuing autonomy. Hence, Sneddon concludes, all should recognize the value of autonomy. Perhaps this is right, but it seems possible that one can value being controlled by another who is, in turn, controlled by another, in an indefinite, if not infinite, regress. Sneddon likely thinks this values cosmonomy; he admits "it is conceptually possible not to value autonomy" but insists that this will not often apply since "Very few real people value only non-personal forms of control or lack of control altogether" (98). The argument is thus predicated on our valuing personal control. But personal control over oneself (autonomy) and personal control by another (heteronomy) are very different and its not clear what is gained by indicating that

the willingly heteronomous value autonomy, when they do not value it for themselves. Imagine someone saying "yes, someone must be autonomous—I am fortunate its not me since heteronomy is better!" Fortunately, Sneddon is more persuasive when he discusses children and how "normal human development is marked by ... increased desires to be active ... and ... to accomplish things" (101) and when he notes the "world-shaping manifestation of our esteem for autonomy is found in the spread of democracy" (103). In any case, it does seem "to matter to us that at least some of our choices are *really* ours" (106). Whether it matters to us in a way that suggests autonomy has intrinsic or instrumental value, sets a constraint or a goal for us, is valued only as a capacity or as something successfully exercised are interesting questions—and all get excellent attention by Sneddon.

The most common practical worries for those of us that value autonomy concern cases where someone else thinks they know what is best for us and should prevent our autonomous activity in order to bring it about. These could be state policies (e.g., helmet and seatbelt laws), employer policies (e.g., requiring retirement savings), or individual actions (e.g., family or friends sabotaging one's relationship). These are all paternalistic. Sneddon discusses what he calls the "Shortest Route objection" to paternalism and the "Tug of War problem" it involves. The former is simply the claim that "autonomy is more straight-forwardly respected by not performing the paternalistic measure" (122). The latter is the claim that any attempt to justify a paternalistic limit to autonomy will end in a conflict of two values—autonomy and well-being—without any clear way to determine which is weightier. To avoid the Shortest Route objection, Sneddon suggests better paternalistic justifications must be attempts to limit another's autonomy of choice for the sake of aiding their autonomy of personhood (123). Here it becomes clear that "autonomy of persons is more important than autonomy of choice" (124), which is also relevant for the Tug of War problem since that might turn out to be a conflict between the values of autonomy of choice and autonomy of persons. (Sneddon also nicely provides an appendix of varieties of paternalism that appear in the literature but that he does not otherwise consider.)

Sneddon moves on by noting that determining “the relationships between self-rule and state rule over self-ruling individuals ... is arguably the defining question” of political philosophy (143). While he accepts that “equality is the fundamental relation between individuals” (144), he believes that “some people have a feature that is of special importance with regard to their relations to the state. These people are capable of self-rule” and because “state rule can, and probably will, interfere with self-rule for these people” the state must be justified *to them* (147). Any state that cannot do this is illegitimate. Hence, on his view, it is the autonomy of (some of) its citizens that creates the defining question of political philosophy. If no one were autonomous, there would be no worry about state action. Sneddon gives two arguments—one conceptual and the other pragmatic—for this view. Neither of these will, I think, persuade those who are not antecedently inclined to agree, but most readers will be so inclined. The rest chapter seven provides a very nice discussion of the “authority tenet” of liberalism (political authority must somehow derive from the will of the governed) and liberalism’s “neutrality commitment” (states should be neutral about how people live). Those studying political philosophy will find this worthwhile reading.

In his final chapter, Sneddon asks if autonomy is omnirelevant and makes a tentative case for an affirmative response, but his defense also suggests “*any* particular value is constitutively omnirelevant” (201). Since earlier chapters make clear autonomy is of value, one wonders if failure to be omnirelevant would lessen that. Perhaps this is a fitting end to the book: it has value—its interesting, well-argued and indicates thorough familiarity with the broader literature—but has problems.