

Afterword: Beyond Autonomy

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The chapters in this book present a much more nuanced picture of our societies than the sketch that opens the introduction to this book. Still, they show how and to what extent autonomy has become a central reference in much of the discourse and many of the practices in liberal individualistic societies. The exploration of the three areas of parenting, education and mental health care on which some individuals, often stirred by policies or by moral entrepreneurs, claim to build the autonomy of other individuals proved to be very informative about the tensions and contradictions at the core of societies in which autonomy is expected of every person because everyone has a potential to develop.

The contemporary idea of hidden potential is so deeply entrenched that it has become second nature. Its importance to members of individualistic tribes makes it relevant not to dismiss it as a simple construct or as a blinding ideology, but to take it seriously, as all chapters in this book did. In a nutshell, it says reams about what living in an individualistic society means. However, because we are so accustomed to this way of living, it may be hard for us to imagine how it could have been otherwise. A look back offers a striking contrast.

In 1831, the 26 year old Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville visited America to learn about the new republic's prison system. However, as an aristocrat, he was much more struck by the importance (at least theoretically) of equality in American society. The two volumes of his *magnum opus*, entitled *Democracy in America*, were an immense success when they were published in 1835 and 1840 in his native country, where monarchy had been restored since the fall of Napoleon's empire. One of the most fascinating and visionary pieces of this work is to be found in Chapter VIII of his second book (1840), entitled "How Equality Suggests to the Americans the Idea of the Indefinite Perfectibility of Man".

Alexis de Tocqueville writes that, in his view, perfectibility is a natural fact and can be seen as one of the distinctive natural traits of humans compared with other living beings: "Although man has many points of resemblance with the brute creation, one characteristic is peculiar to himself, - he improves: they are incapable of improvement." But, says Tocqueville, this natural fact has become in democratic societies a "great philosophical theory" because these societies have got rid of the assignment of each human to a rank determining his future career as well as his "impassable limits" that he will never surpass. But in America, nothing is fixed any more: "Continual changes are then every instant occurring under the observation of every man", which leads to a new way of seeing and living human life, as it is inferred from this fluidity that each person "is endowed with an indefinite faculty of improvement":

Thus, forever seeking – forever falling, to rise again – often disappointed, but not discouraged – he tends unceasingly towards that unmeasured greatness so indistinctly visible at the end of the long track which humanity has yet to tread. It can hardly be believed how many facts naturally flow from the philosophical theory of the indefinite perfectibility of man, or how strong an influence it exercises even on men who, living entirely for the purposes of action and not of thought, seem to conform their actions to it, without knowing anything about it (Tocqueville, 1840).

Humans in these societies live their lives searching for improvement like running a race to the foot of the rainbow that is systematically moving away. Tocqueville's prophetic conclusion is famous and expresses much of our ambivalence regarding the sacred issue of personal autonomy: "Aristocratic

nations are naturally too apt to narrow the scope of human perfectibility; democratic nations to expand it beyond compass.”

In this afterword, I should like to pinpoint three consequences of the ideal of an indefinite human perfectibility that are illustrated by the contributions in this book.

1) Being an individual is being autonomous

Various chapters have studied what is implied by the fact that autonomy has become a value and a norm, a right and a responsibility. In a way, autonomy has become the synonym of “being an individual”, as shown by the success of current research and discourse from moral entrepreneurs mobilizing the neuroscientific idea of cerebral plasticity (see, for example, works by neuroscientists-turned-best-selling authors Alain Prochiantz and Catherine Vidal). We are infinitely diverse, but with a shared possibility – and thus a common duty – to become who we are. Moral entrepreneurs such as best-selling authors, coaches, professionals and even clients continuously play with a fundamental tension in all three areas between autonomy considered to be a natural, taken-for-granted individual ability and autonomy seen as a fragile process conditioned by the existence of a specific environment or the help of other persons.

There is a further tension that needs to be highlighted. On the one hand, the idea of indefinite perfectibility means that every individual is essentially plastic and can make what he or she wants of him- or herself, provided that he or she continuously works on him- or herself: nothing should be considered to be determined or predestined. However, on the other hand, “becoming who you are” means that there is a fundamental, pre-existing identity for each of us, that we have to discover and retrieve from an environment that has diverted us from our own paths because it did not accept and respect, for example, someone’s neuro-atypicality.

Understanding this apparently paradoxical dynamics is essential to analyse what it means to live in individualistic societies where, if you can perfect yourself (and you always can), then it is your responsibility to do so. They show that, far from being a *carte blanche* given to individuals, being autonomous, perfecting oneself and being oneself are legitimate or prestigious behaviours only if they follow certain rules that we are expected to learn and are dependent on some situational parameters. For example, the instruction to become autonomous through finding out what you really want and following your inner guide is relevant only if what you really want is to be autonomous. People treated for mental illness such as depression or psychosis know all too well that, in their case, following their inner guide does not seem to lead to perfectibility and being more autonomous.

2) Intervening on people’s autonomy means seeing an irreducible room for improvement

The second consequence of the ideal of indefinite perfectibility concerns the way working with other persons to help them build their autonomy are considered legitimate, respectful and efficient. Contributions in this book have shown how the multiple examples of interventions on children, pupils and person suffering from mental difficulties are seen as good if they put the person, in some way or another, in the driver’s seat of his or her own transformation. The coaches, parents, caregivers, teachers, etc., do a good job only if they gradually make themselves dispensable. The path to indefinite perfectibility is a never-ending quest for more tools and knowledge that everyone can use to work on themselves.

There is a second interesting point: nowadays parents, caregivers, teachers, coaches, etc., are also expected to share a common ideal according to which every human being, whatever his or her difficulties, suffering, limitations or past experience, has room for improvement. The nature of this

axiom is of course moral, even if it is often translated in scientific terms such as, once again, neural plasticity or personal resilience. People in individualistic societies that have extended the scope of human perfectibility do not like to close doors but prefer to keep possibilities open. All three areas studied in this book are characterized by an overall rejection of a fixist perspective that would condemn a person to be stuck in his or her current state. And if an intervention to build someone's autonomy fails, the common sentiment is that such failure should lead to other attempts with other parameters, but never to considering that such action is useless or a person has reached the glass ceiling of his or her limited possibilities.

Seeing irreducible room for improvement has thus become nowadays the *sine qua non* of a legitimate, respectful and efficient intervention on people's autonomy.

3) Personal autonomy, global challenges

At the end of this book, a question lingers: is the importance of autonomy really a crucial issue? To put it differently: is it really worth spending time and money to study the fascination with personal autonomy when so many daunting challenges, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, skyrocketing inequalities and threats to peace, should be the focus of all our attention? The idea that focusing on the individual distracts us from the real deal, whilst a sociological cliché, may still seem to be not without relevance.

The opposition between psychologization and politicization is in itself an emic theme of individualistic societies. This book has shown that autonomy is a political issue (which does not automatically imply that it should be regarded in political terms to celebrate or denounce it), not only because it is a performative idea doing things to people or, as Durkheim puts it, an "active representation" (*une représentation agissante*), but also a lens through which global matters are approached. Whether we like it or not, human perfectibility in general and personal autonomy in particular have also become one of the most widely used languages to understand and address global challenges, even if these challenges tend to demonstrate that our ability to improve ourselves is totally dependent on environmental parameters that are today under threat. Examples are to be found in outbreaks of mental conditions such as eco-anxiety and fears of social downgrading. It is indeed confusing for individuals who have been nurtured for decades by an ideology of progress and an expectation of better living conditions than the previous generation to be confronted with such challenges. Other examples of this reading of global challenges in individualistic terms can be found in behaviours such as survivalism, trusting in technological solutions and the idea that each of us has a lever for action, such as in the hummingbird tale, which is famous amongst people linking global solutions to a sum of actions by individuals working on themselves.

Whether these representations, actions and behaviours drawing upon the prestige of autonomy are more efficient in the fight against global issues than they claim to lead than the ritual of the *Golden Bough* discussed in the introduction of the book is itself an urgent political question. My hope is that, by taking autonomy seriously, this book will also help us understand why and how these challenges are addressed through the lens of autonomy and ultimately open up new avenues for research.