

Introduction: Puzzling Autonomy

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Abstract

Why is personal autonomy so important in many societies? And why is it a challenging conceptual and practical issue? The introduction first deal with the centrality of the language game of autonomy in individualistic societies. It then offers an overview of this category has been approached in philosophy and sociology. It makes the case for taking autonomy and its paradoxes *seriously*, which is the hallmark of the book chapters, and discuss what it implies. In a next section, it shows how the upheavals and controversies in practices of building autonomous individuals such as parenting, education and mental health care are a relevant case for studying the contradictions of autonomy. They indeed see transformations of what it means to be a teacher, a parent or a caregiver. They allow to observe the rise of new actors such as coaches. But they also lead to deep changes in expectations resting on the shoulders of pupils and students, children and care receivers. The introduction finally explains why Scandinavian countries, the United Kingdom and French-speaking countries are close but contrasted areas in which the book's hypotheses can be tested, and presents the four-part structure of the book.

1. A journey in autonomy

Imagine: You wake up after having slept for a long but unknown time and have to figure out what exactly has changed, and to what extent, in the society you wake up in. Turning on the radio in the morning, you hear a commercial about a professional training course on how to “be a leader” in both your private and your professional life. Even though you are not yet wide awake, this arouses your interest and, whilst drinking your coffee, you visit the website. On the front page you come across a proposal in bold type: coaches are available to help you “take back control of your life” and to be “freed from constraining social norms” that prevent you from unleashing your “true potential” and finally achieving “autonomy”. How do they claim to do this? It seems that what they offer consists mainly of “empowerment” sessions through which those seeking leadership are encouraged to find the answers and guidance “within themselves”. This reclaiming path, they say, starts with “being yourself”.

Being yourself? At last! This is what you have always wanted, and you are pretty sure that you do not need to be empowered to do it! Still, let’s give it a try: you leave the apartment and, once in the street, you begin to engage in conversations with strangers because your inner self has always been very sociable. Unfortunately, these passers-by look at you suspiciously. A person even asks what is wrong with you “from a mental health point of view” and says you should get treatment. Luckily, a good Samaritan bystander asks you how he can help. You tell him that you just woke up and felt entitled to be yourself. He says that he understands, but then gently explains to you that being an autonomous person is not simply doing what you want and expressing yourself freely: it means doing it in a certain way that will put people at ease and help you be recognized for who you are. He encourages you to develop your “social skills” in order to understand informal norms and reminds you that being yourself also comes with a sense of “personal responsibility”.

“Being yourself” seems much more complicated than you first thought. You take a rest on a nearby bench, closing your eyes for a little while and processing what has just happened. Someone apologizes for disturbing you “during your mindfulness meditation” and ask if you are alright. You have no idea what to answer. Given your astonishment, the young lady adds that she wants to know “if you feel that you are in the driver’s seat of your life”. Your head begins to ache and you hold it in your hands. Taking that gesture as a “no”, the woman then says that, even if you might feel down for the moment, you have the “right to be happy in life” and that possibility lies at your fingertips. You should never forget that everyone, including yourself, is a “unique person” and you can make the best of the difficult times you are going through right now. But to do so, you need a “secure yet challenging environment” that will let you discover the “potential of your brain”. She says that she sees how far you could go and she could be this environment for you. You answer that you are fine, thank you, maybe just a little bit melancholic today. As you try to leave, she apologizes and says she doesn’t want to do your good for you, but insists that you should refuse any normative labels such as “depressed” and “mentally ill” that are imposed on some people by society to belittle them. If you feel different from the rest, she says, it may be because you are “neuro-atypical”, and you should cherish this feature and use it as a strength to help other people. She eventually gives you a card on which she presents herself as a “life coach”. You begin to wonder how you are truly making out in life.

Later in the day, you meet a friend whom you used to know when you were at university decades ago. You begin to chat with him, trying to improve those “social competencies” you were warned about. You both hark back to memories of how strict the teachers were at the time. Your friend says that he now realizes that it did hurt him a lot for, although he was a good student, he performed well because he feared punishment and sanctions, not because he truly liked what he was doing, and now he has the impression of having missed out on life. Then he tells you how relieved he is because things have changed: his children are now in a school where teachers are called “supporting companions”. Following the precepts of alternative pedagogies now proved by neurosciences, they let children explore and discover by themselves what they want to know and to be, they guide them by nudges to get them to learn without being taught. In this school where “Non-violent Communication” between everyone is the norm, the most important value, he says, is that everyone (teachers, pupils, parents) feel that they are “in tune with their true selves”.

Your old friend seems unstoppable about the merits of these groundbreaking ways of dealing with children. He argues that this is a game-changing development because children’s brains mature only when parents and teachers form a “benevolent” environment. He then advises you to foster your own future children’s “self-actualization” by reading picture books to them, even before their birth, that will help them to get the vocabulary to recognize and express their emotional states. That is the best way, he claims, to help them build a feeling of “personal achievement” later in life and a fulfilling career. Your friend’s new keyword seems to be “being and acting positive”: positive parenting, positive education and positive thinking.

Leaving your positive friend, you enter a bar called “The inner Journey”. Watching the news on the screen, you learn that the head of state of your country recently gave a speech declaring that “mental health is the great crisis of our time”, but as we are a “resilient nation”, the next ten years will be the “decade of personal autonomy”. In the speech, parents, teachers and mental health caregivers are presented as key players in this fundamental challenge. Their sacred mission is to help people, and especially children, help themselves to become the persons they want to be. These actors will from now on have to attend compulsory coaching sessions where they will be given clear pointers on how to make people autonomous without ever taking their place. You cannot believe your ears when you hear that psychedelic substances will be legalized next year in order to help people shake off depression and maximize their potential. “The question,” the head of state says, “is not whether you take antidepressants or psychedelic substances but how you make use of these substances, with the help of a coach, to foster your ‘agency’ and to be the solution you want to see for yourself and the world”. The speech concludes by stating that during this decade, no one shall be left behind. “Thanks to neurosciences,” it is claimed, “we now know how our infinitely diverse brains work”. New empowering techniques will help overcome social inequalities, provided that each person plays their role in society. Every citizen’s job is to wish to be autonomous. The responsibility of the society is to give you the “capabilities” to be so.

The crowd in the bar applauds, and you really need a drink. The bar’s speciality is a light blond beer called “Freedom”, for which the advert promises “A rendezvous with yourself”. You order it, and the bottle comes, but with a warning on the label: “We trust you to drink with self-control. No one knows your limits better than you do”. However, looking more closely, you also see that it says consuming

this product is “Forbidden for those under 18, pregnant women and people suffering from mental health issues”. It is time to go home.

Eventually, and as if the day was not bizarre and exhausting enough, on your way back, a book displayed in a bookshop window and entitled *The Contradictions of Building Autonomous Individuals* catches your eye. What on earth is all this muck about autonomy and what makes it so fascinating, even for social scientists?

1. Individualist people: a very close tribe

The preceding sketch is less fictional than freely inspired by real events. Some of its aspects might give some readers a feeling of *déjà-vu*. One might feel that some elements are caricatures, but others are in lockstep with the reality of society as it is. Some elements might appear problematic if not frightening, whilst others seem to be perfectly desirable. For some of us, it will look like Orwell's *1984*, for others more like the perfect lost society of Gondawa in Barjavel's *The Ice People*. Reality or fiction? Utopia or dystopia? Beyond the diversity of our reactions, we might assume two elements. First, many people will feel some sense of familiarity with these situations in which personal autonomy is promoted, either because they experience it themselves or because they imagine others do. Second, evoking these situations will not leave us indifferent, as we know or feel that something important for our way of life is at stake. In a nutshell: it speaks to us.

Capabilities, agency, self-management, independence, personal achievement, self-governance, self-control, freedom, empowerment, competencies and skills, individual potential, personal responsibility, etc. As a category, autonomy rarely comes alone. It is enmeshed in what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls a language game, i.e. a set of words and expressions but also a web of social activities that find their socially shared, even if unclear, meanings in the stream of our everyday life. Sociologically, the meaning of the word “autonomy”, or even the use of this category instead of another one in this language game, is less important than the form of life to which it points, *i.e.* the one that we may observe in individualistic societies.

This book explores in depth some aspects, tensions and paradoxes of living in societies that value, probably more than ever before, human beings as individuals. There are of course, as we shall see, multiple ways of living an individualistic form of life and of making use of its language game, but it is quite easy to pinpoint some of the common-sense axioms that are widely taken for granted in such a context: autonomy is an important issue and a valuable thing; it has to do with the valorization of something that is “inside” each individual and makes them unique; our interiority is a resource of meaning and power; one should strive to discover who one truly is and make the most of an inner potential that is often hidden and unexploited; each person is, ultimately, the only one to decide what he/she wants; you should fight familial, traditional and/or social determinisms that divert you from your own path; the role of society is to foster the autonomy of its citizens; individuals have the responsibility of being (pro)active and reducing their dependency on others as much as possible; helping someone in a relevant way does not imply doing something for them, but showing them how they can do it themselves; if everyone mobilized their own resources and lived according to what was inside them, this could have an important, certainly positive, impact on many social issues.

The contributions in this book all rest upon the observation, now commonly accepted in the scientific literature, that autonomy has become an important issue in individualistic societies (and in the social sciences studying them), to the point of becoming a “common condition”, as Alain Ehrenberg (2010) puts it. This does not mean in any way that everyone has suddenly become able to manage their own lives. Nor does it imply that every person living in an individualistic society, whatever their cultural origin or socio-economic background, is passionately excited about the ideals of autonomy. But it means that personal autonomy has become a common good and an unavoidable landmark at various levels.

In social, professional and familial relations, it is a valued way of living one’s life and thus grounds for distinction, as well as a criterion for assigning merit and responsibilities. This is illustrated by the unceasing success of self-help content promoting individual abilities and personal responsibility (Marquis 2014), or by the triumph of the modern “from rags to riches” tale, still unchallenged, from Horatio Alger’s popular novels (such as famous *Ragged Dick*, 1867) to social media influencers explaining how to become successful in every aspect of existence.

In another field, the foothold that the reference to autonomy has taken in international law over the last decades is striking. For example, whilst, like many fundamental texts of the time, the *European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (1950) does not refer to autonomy directly, the European Court of Human Rights has recently interpreted some of its fundamental provisions (such as Article 2 on the Right to life or Article 8 on the Right to respect for private and family life) with regard to self-determination or even “personal autonomy”, understood as “the ability to conduct one’s life in a manner of one’s own choosing”¹. Interestingly, the more recent UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) makes “individual autonomy, including the freedom to make one’s own choice” the very first of its General Principles (CRPD, Art. 3). At the same time, autonomy has become a legitimate claim for every person, and movements of vulnerable people such as psychiatry survivors movements, AIDS patients and organizations of persons with disabilities want to fight oppression with the “Nothing about us without us” slogan for self-determination (see Charlton 1998).

The individual’s autonomy has also become a key preoccupation for governments and in many public policies in the last decades. The role of the State is nowadays widely considered in liberal-individualistic societies to be less that of providing people with undifferentiated protections to overcome adversity than to activate and to empower people so that tailored, temporary support enables them to bounce back and to retake control of their own lives (this stance is also criticized, especially in France). All in all, autonomy is a norm and a value. It is also a collective expectation for everyone, as it is taken for granted that, whatever his or her forces or weaknesses, abilities or impairments, each person has the potential, right and duty to manage him-/herself as autonomously as possible. But do we sufficiently know what we are talking about when we are dealing with autonomy – and is the question worth asking?

2. Praise or criticism? Autonomy as a common-sense, philosophical, historical and sociological subject.

¹ See for example, among some recent decisions, ECtHR, 29 February 2002, *Pretty v. United Kingdom*, No. 2346/02, § 65.

What is “autonomy” in actual fact? Does it even exist? Are people nowadays truly more autonomous than they were before? Can everyone actually become autonomous? Is this contemporary preoccupation with autonomy in public policies a good thing? Does it “work”? Or is it just a big, normative sham, a deceitful lie designed to dominate people, one that might even eventually lead to the collapse of society? How can we distinguish between “false” and “true” personal autonomy? These are the kinds of question with which we are very familiar in common sense, as the ever-growing criticism of self-help techniques shows. Let us take, for example, the evocative titles of essays such as Tom Tiede’s *Self-help Nation. The Long Overdue, Entirely Justified, Delightfully Hostile Guide to the Snake-oil Peddlers Who Are Sapping Our Nation’s Soul* (2001), Steve Justman’s *Fool’s Paradise. The Unreal World of Pop Psychology* (2005), Steve Salerno’s *Sham: How the Self-Help Movements Made America Helpless* (2006), etc.

Individual autonomy and other categories have this characteristic of sacred issues: they have a great power of attraction, but they also create apprehensions and attract criticism. We may fear not being able to make it and missing out one’s own life, but we may also worry about unintended consequences and paradoxes such as the fact that autonomy has become a social norm. The essays cited above often revolve around two ideas. First, if self-help actually made people more autonomous, we should know it by now. “Surely it is the inefficacy, not the efficacy, of self-help that keeps the genre going” (Justman, 2005: 6). Second, self-help books are not only ineffectual, but also can eventually make people *less* autonomous by having them rely on experts or the State instead of trusting themselves or by transforming their lives into lives of boring perpetual self-examination. This kind of criticism has been heard by self-help book authors who, at least in France, have now endorsed criticisms of forms of socially expected autonomy (understood as a commercial sham or as an expectation of performance weighing heavily on the individual)... but only to promote another, true form of individual autonomy as a way of “really being oneself” (see, for example, books by best-selling author and psychiatrist Christophe André, 2009). What is remarkable in such controversies is that the relevance of autonomy *per se* is never in question: only certain forms, definitions or paths to get to it are seen as problematic. As Alain Ehrenberg (2010) has shown, valuing and criticism of autonomy move forward hand in hand in individualistic societies.

Whilst visible in common-sense discussions, these kinds of worries are probably nowhere more present than in academic circles in the social sciences and humanities, where many scholars seem to have endorsed the mission to tell some truths about personal autonomy and the form of life it implies – most often from a critical perspective. Given a global trend of valuing personal autonomy, approaching this category in a positivist way (does it actually exist? what is it exactly?) or evaluative way (is it good or bad?) is of course extremely tempting and has given birth to major works in both philosophy and the social sciences. But where has it led us?

2.1. Autonomy as a philosophical UFO

In the history of philosophy, and moral philosophy in particular, the concept of autonomy is largely derived from the Kantian perspective (Schneewind 2001; Hill 1991; Korsgaard 1996). Seen from this angle, the autonomous individual is someone who is not simply subject to his or her inclinations, but whose will is guided by the exercise of reason and by self-command, i.e. being able to bend the will to moral duties. Against this conception of autonomy, based on the idea of a subject who is fully conscious, rational and free to self-determine his or her actions, the philosophical tradition that came after Marx, Nietzsche and Freud set out to criticize the so-called “philosophies of the subject”,

suspiciously highlighting the illusion of a (modern) subject entirely responsible for controlling his or her actions, and emphasising the fact that the reasons for his or her actions are largely independent of the subject's conscious will.

Another wave of even more radical critiques of the figure of the autonomous, self-governing individual surfaced in the 20th century in the wake of Ludwig Wittgenstein and other philosophers inspired by his work. In this profoundly anti-internalist perspective, the focus is not on determinations hindering individual autonomy, but rather on the very fact that any conception of autonomy as self-foundation is logically impossible. Indeed, as anthropologist Veena Das (1998) shows regarding suffering, the public dimension of human life always takes precedence over the private dimension: in order to live and to express one's own feelings, one has to rely on a public language, no matter how private and intimate these feelings might seem. Autonomy, in this view, paradoxically lies in the learning of external rules, which is an essential condition of any action that is generally considered to be "individual" (Descombes 2005).

Moreover, as Iris Joan Tronto (1993), Murdoch (2013), Eva Kittay (2011) and many other scholars borrowing from the philosophy of care or feminist theories have shown, the dominant liberal perspective on autonomy, crystallises in the heroic figure of the action man, strongly tends to obliterate the indispensable, and often invisible human, social and material aids that allow anyone of us to say something to the effect of "I am conducting a brilliant professional career" (see Paperman and Laugier 2020). One should not focus on an abstract capacity or right to decide what is good for oneself. Rather, one should pay attention to the very concrete situational parameters that determine the capabilities of a person, *i.e.* the actual possibility for the person to achieve what matters to him or her (Nussbaum 2011).

In a nutshell, it is fair to say, as philosopher Vincent Descombes (2013) puts it, that much Western philosophical and political thought has tried, over at least a century, to reveal autonomy as an insufficient, biased, problematic, if not simply false, category. What is more, for those in social sciences and humanities who wish to safeguard autonomy as a value or category, all hopes of building an encompassing definition or an integrated theory have until now foundered against the double status of autonomy as an *etic* (scholarly) and an *emic* (common sense) category. There is, what is more, an indisputable diversity of academic perspectives (opposing for example those for whom autonomy is a substantial value that has to do with the definition of a life worth living it and those for whom autonomy is above all a matter of procedures and possibilities of choice). There is also and above all an apparently unsurpassable multiplicity of practical uses of autonomy, especially with regard to people whose autonomy is considered problematic. A recently published book entitled *Autonomy and Mental Disorder* (Radoilska, 2012) clearly illustrates some of the shortcomings of a state of the art about autonomy that can be summarized as follows: we have the intellectual tools to identify many conceptual, ethical and practical problems regarding autonomy, but we do not have any viable solution to surmount them.

2.2. The intricate roots of autonomy

One may then ask why, as individuals, groups and societies, we have come to value so much a belief that at best seems to act as an empty shell and at worst is a problematic chimera. How has this become a landmark of an individualistic way of life? Philosopher Charles Taylor insists on the need to trace the origin of the way we "feel the demands to freedom and self-rule as axiomatically justified"

(Taylor 1989, 495), at least in the beginning of the modern period, with its Deist, Enlightenment and Romantic movements that have, in various ways, delved into the individual's inner self. Sociologists such as Max Weber (1967) and Louis Dumont (1985) propose that we consider that the origin of individualism and its accent on the value of self-determination is to be found in even more ancient sources, such as the invention of "subjective rights" in the Middle Ages (Occam), or even the monotheistic religions of Christianity and (ancient) Judaism.

Many historians have insisted on the importance of the *melting pot* that was America during the last four centuries, where Protestantism, Liberalism, Capitalism, Emerson's transcendentalist philosophy on the "divine sufficiency of the individual", James' Pragmatism and Quimby's New Thought movement met the fascination for Mesmer's "animal magnetism", Eddy's Christian science curing the mind and the body, Coué's method, Freud's 1909 Conferences at Clark University (and the theories of those, such as Jung, who followed and then broke with him), Peale's 1952 *Power of Positive Thinking*, Maslow's pyramid of the human needs and techniques and movements such as those developed in the Californian Esalen Institute, to name just a few of the elements in the mix (see *inter alia* Hale 1971, Hewitt 1998, Illouz, 2008). These ingredients, among many others, have been interpreted as progressively giving birth to an unprecedented preoccupation with the self, termed the (third) "Great Awakening" by essayist Tom Wolfe, that was particularly visible in the Seventies' "'Me' Decade" (Wolfe 1976). Other scholars also link the impressive success of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's positive psychology at the beginning of the 21st century to this breeding ground (Cederstrom 2018).

But whatever happened in the United States should definitely not be interpreted as the sole starting impulse in modern history of a hypothetical wave of American individualistic way of life that gradually conquered the world. Indeed, other genealogies exist in various countries. In France and continental Europe more generally, many social scientists have given a prominent role to actors in the last three centuries who claimed to explore, to correct or to cure the human mind, its madness and its suffering. Among these actors, religious movements and therapeutic figures from Mesmer to contemporary (neuro)psychiatrists via Freud or French alienists are considered to have played an important role in delving into modern individuals' interiority (see, for example, the writings of historians Henri Ellenberger (1970) and Hervé Guillemain (2016), psychiatrist Gladys Swain (1994), philosopher Pierre-Henri Castel (2011, 2012) and more recently sociologist Nicolas Henckes and historian Benoît Majerus (2022).

Other scholars studied how things unfolded during the same period in England, when psychology (and especially scientific psychology) was gaining ground, whilst being also linked to programmes for measuring individuals' and groups' health (Rose, 1985). But above all, one must not forget that the expression "self-help" was coined by author Samuel Smiles in Victorian England, not the U.S. In 1859, Smiles published a book titled *Self-help, with Illustrations of Character, Conduct and Perseverance*, of which 250,000 copies were sold (after having initially been rejected by the newly founded publisher *Routledge!*) in which he wrote:

The spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual; and, exhibited in the lives of many, it constitutes the true source of national vigour and strength. Help from without is often enfeebling in its effects, but help from within invariably invigorates. Whatever is done FOR men or classes, to a certain extent takes away the stimulus and necessity of doing for themselves; and where men are subjected to over-guidance and

overgovernment, the inevitable tendency is to render them comparatively helpless (Smiles [1859] 2002)

Later in the 20th century, other scholars with a background in “psy” disciplines (psychoanalysts Donald W. Winnicott and Françoise Dolto, psychiatrist John Bowlby, psychologist Pierre Daco, etc.), as well as countless authors of popular books, nourished what was termed a “therapy culture” in England (by the title of sociologist Frank Furedi’s book, 2003) and a “post-psychoanalytical society” in France (by the title of the 1981 book of sociologist Robert Castel).

Finally, more recent works show that this interest in the individual and the rise of a therapeutic approach to the individual’s inner self and its capacities can now be observed in contexts as different as Japan (Kitanaka 2012) and India (Gagnant 2023), with many local adaptations to existing practices and representations. All in all, a total history of autonomy and related categories, taken as values and a way of life, seems as exhausting and impossible as offering clear, usable definitions of what they mean. One thing is certain, though: the fascination for the individual and the individual’s personal autonomy is in many ways enmeshed in our recent history.

2.3. Sociological denunciations of autonomy

For much of the last century, numerous sociologists have of course noticed the importance of the reference to the language game of autonomy in a “form” of life that was becoming more and more individualistic. This has led to so many remarkable studies that it is not possible to describe them all. However, it is probably fair to say that the general tone of the research regarding the norm of autonomy is critical (to say the least) here, too. Still, some notable exceptions are worth mentioning. Some authors, such as Anthony Giddens (1992), rejoice over the growing presence of autonomy. More interestingly, others, such as Durkheim (2002), Elias (1991) and Dumont (1985), offer a more analytical perspective – several chapters of this book refer to these authors, and we shall come back to them later on. However, the vast majority of sociologists working on this issue have seen their job as one of uncovering not only the conceptual and genealogical issues about autonomy, but above all its supposed various and nefarious effects on individuals and societies. How can we explain this stance?

The valuing of personal autonomy is at odds with much of a discipline that is accustomed to analysing the determinants of individual behaviours and representations as well as of collective structure. It is also an easy playing field, since sociologists and many observers of social life would not have too much difficulty dismissing autonomy as a (post-)modern fantasy: the interdependences we are stuck in for the least of our everyday life actions, the big-data-proven regularities in preferences we see as intimate and our shrinking individual or even collective room for manoeuvre regarding global challenges are all becoming increasingly visible. It is not much more complicated to brush off the claim of autonomy as pathetically contradictory: if autonomy is nowadays a social norm, trying to be yourself by rejecting social norms is the least autonomous thing you can do.

However, the hypothetical consequences of the ubiquitous reference to individual autonomy have been the main objects of sociological criticism and worries. One can schematically identify two arguments which are not mutually exclusive. First, the growing reference to autonomy has been regarded as a threat both to the making of society and to people’s quality of life. In the English-speaking world, this perspective is clearly exemplified in Rieff’s *The Triumph of the Therapeutics* (1966), Sennett’s *The Fall of the Public Man* (1977), Bellah *et al.’s Habits of the Heart* (1985) and

above all Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978): being full of himself and his feelings, the modern individual considers the external world only in respect of the way it touches him personally. Instead of gaining the sham autonomy promised by therapeutic-capitalist advertisements, he sinks in his dull life, no longer capable of making the sacrifices that are required for a truly autonomous life in a thriving society. In Germany, Axel Honneth (2010) and other heirs to the *Frankfurt school's* Critical Theory (Adorno 2011) have pointed to the pathological aspects of a social organization centred around (self-)performance that impoverishes peoples' life, makes them unhappy and, from a mental health standpoint, literally unwell. Many French-speaking authors have also embraced what can be termed as a "decline model" in which they pitch what they see as an atomizing interest in personal autonomy against the very possibility of "doing" society (Ehrenberg 2010; Marquis 2014).

While this first perspective has been greatly inspired by authors borrowing from psychoanalysis as well as from social sciences, the other main line of criticism clearly refers to the seminal work of Michel Foucault. As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) show, Foucault progressively moved from a "repressive hypothesis" (see *Surveiller et punir*, 1975) to the idea of a "bio-power" (*Naissance de la biopolitique* or "The birth of biopolitics" was indeed the title of the lessons he gave in 1979 at the *Collège de France*). Bio-power is a way to govern human beings that is compatible with the principles of liberalism and democracy in societies where personal freedom is important. In this system, power is not exerted through constraining or restricting individuals' autonomy, but through "techniques of the self" (such as practising tests and exercises or giving an account of oneself, see Butler 2005) that have people govern themselves through self-knowledge and the building of their own autonomy – in a certain way that makes them knowledgeable and manageable. We are nowadays living in a "psy-shaped space" (Rose 1999, 265) where psy disciplines have made us think everyone has an "inner psychology that animates and explains our conduct and strives for self-realization, self-esteem, and self-fulfilment in everyday life" (Rose 1996: 3). The contemporary promotion of self-agency is thus, in Foucault's words, an "action on people's actions", as the contemporary interest in politics of the nudge would illustrate perfectly. Autonomy is, to cite some famous book titles of the Foucauldian sociologist Nikolas Rose, a command to "Inventing Our Selves" (1996), a way of "Governing the Souls" (1990) through psychological knowledge, as well as a mean to organize the "Management of the Mind" through the "New Brain Sciences" (2013). But it is in no way a true promise that one should take literally. Moreover, it might seem, as Castel (1981) put it, that working on one's own personal autonomy is the pathetic signal of a dramatic misreading of where the actual points of leverage are.

3. Taking autonomy – and its paradoxes – seriously

Whilst extremely powerful and interesting, these critical perspectives on autonomy may miss some important points. In a way, approaching autonomy through such questions as "Does it really exist?" (plausible answer from most authors cited above: no) and "What are the real effects of its contemporary promotion?" (plausible answer: they are numerous, but different from what is claimed, and mostly negative) comes down to acting as an anthropologist who, when confronted with magical or sorcery practices, would wonder if these practices were as effective as they claimed to be, or if they were simply a travesty. There is indeed no difficulty in showing that neither these traditional rituals nor the contemporary celebration of autonomy live up to the expectations that they set. Further in this line of questioning, it will then seem only logical to wonder why people still hold on to beliefs, be it witchcraft or autonomy, when reality continuously disproves them and it is supposed

that these beliefs might even hurt them. Among the most frequently given answers to this interrogation, we find the idea that people commit this error either because, for whatever historical, cultural or sociological reason, they do not have the capacity to think correctly or as responsible citizens, or because they are deceived by a social organization that dominates them. We join here Wittgenstein's classical criticism of Frazer's position on rituals in his *Golden Bough* (criticism later echoed by Peter Winch's *Understanding a Primitive Society* (1964)):

Frazer says that it is very difficult to discover the error in magic and this is why it persists for so long – because, for example, a ceremony which is supposed to bring rain is sure to appear effective sooner or later. But then it is queer that people do not notice sooner that it does rain sooner or later anyway...It never does become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity. (Wittgenstein 2018 [1935]).

In our view, regarding autonomy through this lens might reduce our ability to understand why people, groups and society still resort to this language game. "Taking autonomy seriously", as well as the tensions, controversies and paradoxes it creates, is the primary aim of this book. What does that mean? In an individualistic form of life, personal autonomy is something that obviously counts, despite all its limitations highlighted by academic works and common-sense preoccupations. It is a normative horizon for many lay individuals, professionals and public policies. Despite being an empty shell, it gets people to agree on its moral merits quickly. (And indeed, who in liberal individualistic societies is going to say that, generally speaking, autonomy is a bad thing?) It is an expectation that we often have for ourselves, if not for others.

But autonomy is unclear, it generates common-sense disagreements as well as contradictions in everyday practices about the way to measure it, to perform autonomously and to foster it. It might be an important criterion in many circumstances that allows people, professionals or policymakers to discuss what an effective practice that respectful of everyone's agency is, or what a life worth living is. But in most cases, and despite the generalities pinpointed above, it does not deliver sufficient, obviously shared answers *per se*.

These debates and disputes are, for instance, extremely visible in social, ethical and often legal controversies regarding liminal situations in which autonomy is considered to be not fully present and not fully absent, as is often the case with mental health issues. How should caregivers deal with the will of a psychiatric patient, even if what he wishes is considered as potential harmful to him (see Pols 2003 and Velpry 2008)? To what extent can people refuse vital treatments, disagree with experts or relatives about how their illnesses are labelled and/or assign their own labels or ask that their peculiarities not be treated but respected as a sign of neurodiversity (see Marquis, Maignan and Daelman, this volume)? Is it right to consider a young person to be accountable for his/her disruptive behaviours or to explain them by the immaturity of the individual's psychological development (see the chapters by Ehrenberg and Marquis, and by Marquis and Mignon, this volume)?

Conflicts also arise in cases where people claim the right to perform acts that affect their own autonomy adversely. When young adults claim that taking anti-depressant medication or psychedelics is part of their identity, should that be seen as a sign of autonomy or as a form of alienation (see the chapters by Petersen and by Charrasse and Marquis in this volume)? What attitude should be taken towards a young adult asking for euthanasia because of unbearable suffering caused by trauma (see, for example the debates around the tragic case of the 23-year-old

Belgian survivor of the 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels who was euthanized in 2022)? How should we react when a loved one wilfully joins a group that others see as a sect and deliberately accepts the restrictions that are placed on his/her own autonomy?

Disputes are also frequent in cases where the autonomy of an individual conflicts with that of another person. Is it acceptable to limit the autonomy of parents in the name of their children's (and even as-yet unborn children's) autonomy (see the chapters by Lee, Martin and Westerling in this volume)? What kind of autonomy should teachers leave to pupils and students in the learning processes (see the chapters by Degraef *et al.*, Durler, and Morel in this volume)? And last but not least, is having children or adults speak the language of skills and personal autonomy a relevant way to make them autonomous, or is it just a way to normalize and (de)responsibilize them (see the chapters by Frawley *et al.*, Gullov, and Jensen and Prieur in this volume)?

Taking autonomy seriously means distancing oneself from a perspective that considers the practical use of autonomy to be a mistake – be it understandable – that should be corrected, or, on the contrary, praises the growing reference to this moral category. Proving the existence or absence of personal autonomy is not what is at stake, no more than proving people right or wrong is. Still, it does not mean taking the claim of autonomy at face value. It does not prevent the need to develop a critical perspective to show, for example, how the reference to autonomy might place a burden on individuals and reconfigure the State's action, how it may come down to asking people to accept what is imposed on them or, more generally, to what extent people are in unequal positions when it comes to satisfying the demands of this social norm.

However, taking autonomy seriously also means not assuming that the controversies mentioned above would be easily settled if autonomy were defined more accurately or flawlessly. It may even call for not delving into these controversies, taking sides or counting points. On the contrary, it means considering that this language game, its importance as well as *the controversies it generates*, are somehow coextensive of individualistic societies, as they are part of our "collective consciousness", as Durkheim would put it: it is an issue on which you do not want to mess up.

Finally, taking autonomy seriously means, as proposed in the beginning of this introduction, regarding it as a door to understanding what it is to live in individualistic societies in which the development of the self is a common preoccupation and we share "a feeling of an irreducible singularity" (Elias 1991). For this purpose, autonomy will be approached in this book not *in abstracto* but as a performance, not as a musical score but as a concert or, to refer once again to a Wittgensteinian image, as an engine that is not idling but at full throttle.

4. Building autonomous individuals

The chapters in the book all deal with a specific set of practical uses of the language game of autonomy: situations in which some people try to foster the autonomy of other people. Intervening in other people's lives to transform them or to help them become something they are not yet is a common activity in every society: nurturing, caring for, educating, feeding, advising, curing, teaching, showing, socializing, welcoming or excluding, helping, acting in their stead, imposing, etc. Although they are very common, these practices are most of the time rendered routine and coded if not formalized and ritualized. They will be considered legitimate and efficient only if they respect some parameters: who does what to whom, in which circumstances, with which title(s) or public acknowledgement, etc.

In societies that value personal autonomy as a given and or/as a possibility for each individual, this immediately points to a moral and practical problem: is personal autonomy always an already-there capacity inside each of us or is it a to-be-acquired skill that is situational and dependent on the intervention of other people? This issue has cascading declinations: is it right to consider that some people (such as persons with (mental) disabilities, young or elderly people, persons with low social skills) are less autonomous than others and should be treated as such? And if (almost) every human being is, in (nearly) every situation, deemed to be the most capable of deciding what is good for him/her, what would be a legitimate and efficient intervention, even if this intervention strove to foster his/her autonomy? Whose decision is it? What are the respective rights and duties of each party? And what should be done when disagreements arise? Should we avoid at all costs doing good to a person against, despite or besides her will, and if so, how? Can a person autonomously refuse to be autonomous? Etc.

In an interesting essay, philosopher Jane Heal (2012) observes that even if no consensus emerges about a positive definition of autonomy, we undoubtedly value the contrary of its contrary: non-coercion. Indeed, in individualistic societies, the freedom and potential of the individual is easily seen as threatened by external, social and collective norms and elements that seem to have an institutional origin and are often interpreted as constraints, coercion and unacceptable limits on self-determination (hence the current accent on personal choice and capabilities). This corresponds to what Ehrenberg (2010) calls the “personal turn of individualism”, when autonomy, no longer a distant aspiration, becomes an immediate expectation. It is indeed fair to say that, in such contexts, feeling allergic to external interference that may restrict one’s possibility to steer one’s own life and criticizing those affecting other people’s lives are valued. The interpretation of the aforementioned UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) by the body responsible for monitoring its implementation, the UN Committee for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, is an eloquent example in this regard. In its General Observations (especially Observation n°5), the Committee presents any kind of institutional form – not only “total institutions” but also any imposed routine in small settings or ambulatory care, any form of gathering people with the same characteristics in order to facilitate their treatment, any care given by a person that the care receiver did not explicitly chose, etc. – as unacceptably restricting the autonomy and personal choice of persons with disabilities, even if the initial aim is precisely to help them lead a more autonomous life (see Marquis, Maignan and Daelman in this volume).

5. Education, parenting and mental health care: from asymmetry to symmetry?

In individualistic societies, intervening on other people is thus practically and conceptually a very complicated issue raising tensions. These tensions are manifested nowhere more clearly than in three fields that are socially designated as responsible for building and repairing other people’s – especially children’s – autonomy, namely, mental health care, parenting and education, three fields at the core of the chapters in this book. Why study together these areas that have usually been regarded in the social sciences as separate thematic fields? Because in individualistic societies they are confronted with similar challenges and paradoxes.

Mental health care, parenting and education have historically been based on an asymmetrical relationship between, on the one hand, a person in a higher position (a parent, a teacher, a caregiver), whose position is legitimated by some sort of social validation (titles and expertise,

tradition and eldership, etc.) and, on the other hand, a person in a lower position (a child, a pupil, a patient), whose autonomy must be (re)constructed through top-down processes: the teacher inculcates knowledge in his/her pupil, the parent educates his/her child, the caregiver cures his/her patient. While Talcott Parsons' (1975) classical "sick role" analysis of the structure of the relations between patient and physician (which he compares to the relations between a child and a parent, or a student and a teacher) offers a functionalist perspective on the necessity for the patient to submit to the doctor's expertise, the bulk of the research in the social sciences has approached these relations in a cautious, if not critical, way, questioning, amongst other things, the power relationships, domination processes and symbolic violence involved in the fields of education, (mental) health care and parenting (see, for an example in the mental health field, the numerous works about the too often overlooked consent of the patient).

But the criticisms of the classically asymmetrical practices are far from being the prerogative of sociology. They have also been developed in other academic areas (such as psychology or pedagogy), or by famous figures (such as Celestin Freinet and Maria Montessori for education, Franco Basaglia for mental health care, and Donald Winnicott or Françoise Dolto for parenting). Last but not least, they have been increasingly present in the common sense of individualistic societies. Indeed, all three fields share the fact that they are confronted with movements and actors who reject traditional forms of asymmetry as being not only disrespectful, but also inefficient, and promote instead more horizontal, symmetrical and negotiated forms of intervention that rely on everyone's presumed capacity and desire for autonomy. They take the person's competencies and resources as the starting point of any move and tend to foster his/her *agency* in order to put him/her in the driver's seat of his/her own change. Movements such as Positive Parenting (see Martin and Mignon and Marquis in this volume), Benevolent Education (see the chapters by Degraef *et al.*, Durler, and Morel in this volume), Hypersensitive Persons or Voice Hearers movements (see Marquis, Maignan and Daelman in this volume) are, among many others, front and centre in this redefinition of what fosters the autonomy of a person in a way that is at the same time respectful and efficient. This redefinition is also at the core of public policies focusing on the enablement of actors such as children (see Ehrenberg and Marquis, and Gullov in this volume), parents (see Martin and Westerling in this volume) and students (see Frawley *et al.* in this volume).

Moral entrepreneurs of this trend, be they public or private actors, often mobilize specific languages to establish their claims, such as psychic suffering and well-being, as well as (cognitive) neuroscience categories. They call for focusing the interventions on a new object: peoples' *skills*, and especially social skills, such as the ability to express or to control oneself (see Gullov, and Jensen and Prieur, this volume). They reframe parenting, educating and caring for a person in new terms and new forms that are in line with the individualistic ideal that everyone has inner resources: companionship, guiding, peer-expertise and peer-supporting, testimonies, empowerment, etc. "Coaching" is undoubtedly the most explicit and most often used term in this new normative landscape.

In trying to transform the parameters of the process of building autonomous individuals, these positions and practices also alter actors at both ends of the spectrum. First, what does it mean, in this configuration, to be a good teacher, a relevant mental health caregiver or an adequate parent? How should one react to a child's tantrum? Are university staff responsible for the mental health of their students? What is the difference between guiding people through therapeutic psychedelic trips and giving them prescriptions for antidepressants? The chapters in this book analyse what the

recommended practices for these actors dedicated to helping people produce the changes that they need themselves are (Marquis and Lenel, coming), how they legitimate their interventions and even what new labels are assigned to them. Several contributions show how, in the three domains, organizing an environment dedicated to sustaining individuals' potentials to evolve and transform themselves is now considered to be the overarching mission of teachers, caregivers and parents. They also point to an important transformation: these "autonomy makers" are themselves subject to sometimes paradoxical injunctions. On the one hand, they are encouraged to be autonomous, to trust their "intuitive knowledge", to set their own limits, to increase their own capacity to distance themselves from inherited institutional models and general social expectations. On the other hand, parents, teachers and caregivers are monitored by policies and advised to consider that their parental or professional role should be subject to a learning and training process (in light of the most advanced (neuro)scientific knowledge for example about how our brain works) because, if not properly conducted, their actions might harm the development of the people in their care. They are expected to create a good-enough environment, which at the same time offers challenges and security, limits and unconditional acceptance, strong landmarks but also the possibility to determine one's own life project. New actors emerge, such as self-help producers, *doulas*, experts by experience, promoters of alternative pedagogies mixed with cognitive neurosciences, etc., who claim to enhance the autonomy of those whose role in turn is to foster personal autonomy. The parental coaching market is exemplary in this regard. It organizes a kind of transitivity where coaches coach (future parental) coaches, who in turn coach parents to help them coach their children.

Second, if we take the other side's perspective, what it means to be an individual whose autonomy is fostered by external intervention is also deeply transformed. The positions and practices challenging old-fashioned asymmetrical relationships come with what one could call a "practical anthropology" of the infant, pupil, student and patient. This representation for all practical purposes of what a human being is is actually quite demanding. Overall, it presupposes capacities for and interest in autonomy. It assumes the existence in each of them of a (perhaps vulnerable, perhaps hidden) potential waiting for the right environmental conditions to bloom. People must now meet the expectations set by their own potential. All the chapters in this book deal with the question of how these characters are constructed – with a special focus on *already-but-not-completely autonomous* toddlers, children and teenagers, who are clearly crystallizing hopes, fears, controversies and paradoxes. They show in various ways why the competencies of these "incompletely autonomous individuals" are the subjects of so much concern, to which stimuli they are supposed to respond, why their troubles are often read through a mental health lens, and above all what kind of expectations rest upon their shoulders. The autonomous person who is doing well is not supposed to do everything on his/her own. But such autonomous people are expected to have the capacity to be themselves (instead of not knowing who they are and what their strengths and weaknesses are) and to express themselves, to be active (instead of being passive and expecting everything automatically to fall into their hands) and to be well integrated in their social environments, for example by knowing how, where and when to search for support (instead of being isolated or, on the contrary, relying too much on other people) (Marquis 2022).

Of course, these ideal new roles do not always translate into reality: children may not always be good and responsible, pupils fail exams despite Montessori-inspired teaching, students may not take up resources designed to support their well-being, parents may continue to feel depressed and helpless

after seeing a coach, patients may reject environments that are perceived as being good enough, people may not use medication or drugs in a way that makes them more autonomous and people may simply not be interested in being more autonomous. It is then interesting, as several chapters in each of the three fields do, to see how these failures are explained by the various stakeholders. More precisely, contributions in this book shows how these views and practices challenging education, parenting and care refer to a practical theory of accountability (following Mary Douglas' expression (1980)), *i.e.* ways of dispatching responsibilities for successes and failures. The individual brain, pupils' family environments, cultural background, socio-economic inequalities, the State, society and its norms, each actor's personal sense of responsibility, etc., are all categories mobilized by stakeholders to grasp what is going on when the rituals of autonomy fail to deliver. In studying these evocations, chapters in this book show how, in the three domains under consideration, creating someone's autonomy and being autonomous are indeed coded – yet unclear – expectations.

6. Plural autonomies: perspective from three European contexts (Denmark, the United Kingdom and French-speaking continental Europe)

When studying any social objects, social scientists are confronted with what William James termed the problem of the “one and the many”. Through various studies in the domains of mental health care, parenting and education, the overarching goal of this book is to sharpen our understanding of the form of human life in an individualistic society. In other words, in focusing on the uses and paradoxes of autonomy, we shed light on an important aspect of our “collective consciousness” (Durkheim) and show that, in various contexts, we can find clues to what Georg Simmel calls “shared social forms” in the geometry of social life: common issues, arguments and resources, actors and structures, values and representations, common changes in the building of autonomous individuals. Not a collection of scattered chapters and perspectives, this book tends strongly to shed light on a global, albeit elusive, phenomenon transcending particular and different situations. The accent is clearly set on the “one” rather than on the “many”.

We have, however, already suggested that there are multiple ways of performing an individualistic form of life. As some contributions taking a socio-historical perspective show, these can vary across time in the same society (see Ehrenberg and Marquis in this volume and Martin in this volume). However, the issue of autonomy also unfolds in different ways depending on the specific environment of each (individualistic) society. To account for this “many in the one” aspect, the book offers perspectives on parenting, mental health care and education from three European areas: Denmark (and Scandinavia more generally), the United Kingdom, and French-speaking countries (France, the French-speaking parts of Belgium and of Switzerland).

These three areas represent variations of liberal individualistic societies that are close enough to share many family resemblances but different enough to enable us to pinpoint some interesting differences. Though it is not the aim of the book to offer a systematic comparative perspective, two elements are worth mentioning.

First, regarding autonomy itself, it is striking to see in the contributions that, whilst the issue of building autonomous individuals is extremely important in the three areas under consideration, it does not entail the use of the same words, and certainly not the same meanings. Most interestingly,

the controversies do not unfold in the exact same way. The differences are particularly visible regarding the character of “the child”, which, as we saw, is central in the reconfigurations of the processes of building autonomous individuals. Marquis and Mignon (in this book) offer in the first part of their chapter a condensed summary of what other chapters on French, Danish and UK contexts show, to wit, fostering the autonomy of the child is at the same time a goal for stakeholders and policies and a problematic issue in the three areas, which entails some actions on and by the environment. In Denmark, the challenge is to recognize and to develop the (already-there) social skills of a basically competent child. In the UK, the issue revolves around the protection of a fragile child whose potential and development are threatened by a dangerous environment. In French-speaking countries, the debates revolve around the indetermination of the child’s potential, seen by some as wondrous (such as promoters of the Positive Parenting Movement) and by others as calling for limits to be set.

These differences are manifest in policy preoccupations. In Denmark, the issue of children’s skills is fundamental, as shown by the chapters by Gullov and by Westerling, particularly in the school institution. The first part of the chapter by Degraef *et al.* contrasts the development of (pre)schooling in Denmark with France and French-speaking Belgium. As is also clearly shown by Morel and by Durler (in this book), the language of competencies was also spread successfully in the French-speaking education context, but with some differences from the Danish context: the accent on performance and achievement, the reference to neurosciences-based approaches and a much stronger debate about the role of teachers (and parents). On the French-speaking parenting scene, the matter of the *limits* that are to be imposed (or not) on the child is nowadays a much more heated subject of debate (see Martin, and Ehrenberg and Marquis in this volume). In the UK, the issue of protecting the child – and even the still to be conceived child – is extremely visible in the policies regarding alcohol consumption by (future) pregnant women, as Lee clearly shows). In the same way, as Frawley *et al.* show in their chapter, questions arise about the responsibility of the university in protecting the students’ mental health.

These differences in accents regarding autonomy and its paradoxes can be explained, as several chapters show, by differences in socio-historical background. But they are also intertwined with sociological sensitivities that are represented in the book. Authors from Denmark work from different perspectives (epistemological, interactionist, Eliassian, etc.) on the prominent place taken by skills in various contexts and on the ways it redistributes the responsibilities and expectations on different stakeholders – in the first place the competent individuals themselves. Authors from the UK have a special interest in questioning the hiatus between the general promotion of autonomy or a declared interest in mental health, and the consequences it has concretely, which may consist in factually leading to a reduction in individuals’ autonomy. Authors from French-speaking countries (France, Belgium and Switzerland) offer a dialogue between two perspectives: one that analyses the surge in the references to autonomy (and the debates between, to put it quickly, the power of our brain vs. the need for external landmarks) as a way to understand what living in an individualistic society means and another that closely examines the (in)coherence of this appeal to autonomy, the role of the State, and the burden this places on stakeholders, *i.e.* parents, teachers, children, etc..

Of course, many other areas could have been taken into account in the analyses. First, it would be interesting to contrast the areas under study with other European countries where similar processes

of promoting (the fostering of) personal autonomy are coloured by socio-economic difficulties (for example in Italy, where transformations in the families can come up against the shrinking possibilities for people to become financially independent), or by political and ideological processes such as a return to traditionalist views or illiberal policies (for example Hungary or Poland). Second, comparing European perspectives and the state of affairs in North America regarding the issue of autonomy could also prove to be extremely relevant (Ehrenberg (2010) laid the groundwork for an analysis of the role of autonomy in French and U.S. societies). Finally, one of the most pressing issues is to put the results and analyses presented here in perspective with field work in and views from the Global South.

7. Four elements to analyse the contradictions of building autonomous individuals

The book stems from a *Starting Grant* project, funded by the *European Research Council* (n°850754), entitled “Coaching as a social ritual: acting on people in a liberal-individualistic society (parenting, education, mental health care)”. Several chapters written by this research team present some of the first results of this “CoachingRituals” project in each of these three scenes. Thanks to this funding, the team had the opportunity to hold several seminars to discuss its work, which culminated in a workshop at Aalborg University in 2021, co-organized by Nicolas Marquis and the late Anders Petersen. This process enabled us to meet with some of the most interesting experts on the elusive but ubiquitous issue of autonomy in the three fields, some of them being (co-)authors in this book. Besides the differences in perspectives and field work, all the authors share a common socio-anthropological interest in what might be called “the felicity conditions of autonomy”: the reasons why, as individuals and societies, we find this language game interesting, we praise the work on the self, we believe it works. Four elements have been considered indispensable to understand the importance of autonomy nowadays and underpin the structure of the book.

7.1. Autonomy in the brain? (Neuro)cognitive sciences and changing representations of the child and pupil

The starting point of the first part of the book is the growing reference, especially (but not only) in the field of education, to an ever more important entity: the individual’s (and especially the child’s) brain. Why is that so, and what does it change? The three chapters show that cognitive (neuro)sciences-based approaches offer a new and successful language for the idea of a potential hidden in each child. In their respective chapters, the authors shed various registers of light on collective representations, pedagogical or therapeutic methods and ways of attributing responsibilities when behavioural or learning failures arise.

Alain Ehrenberg and Nicolas Marquis propose a socio-historical perspective of the overall moral context of the transformations of individualism. First, they develop an analytical framework to explore the relationships amongst neurosciences, mental health, autonomy and individualism. Second, they apply this framework to identify an important shift, at least in France, regarding the way we see children and their disorders. After being considered, in the aftermath of the Second World War, “expressive selves” to listen to, children have begun to be regarded more and more as full-fledged actors of their own lives who are to be empowered. This shift is related to changes in

collective representations and to the growing legitimacy of neurosciences, to the detriment of psychoanalysis.

Stanislas Morel then questions the relevance of considering that cognitive neurosciences offer a clear background to the categories of autonomy in the field of education. In fact, he shows how neurosciences are often considered to offer prescriptive or even authoritarian insights. What is more, they may be seen as bearing a deterministic message, according to which each of us is a “genetic self”, and have been used to criticize very harshly methods and results from pedagogies that leave children great room for manoeuvre. Morel questions how moral entrepreneurs mobilizing neurosciences in the field of education manage to make these references compatible with the moral principle of autonomy (for example by advancing the notion of “structured autonomy”) and to show that education should take account of strong constraints on learning – and thus on teachers’ and pupils’ practices.

Drawing upon the first results from the ERC project *CoachingRituals*, **Veronique Degraef, Emmanuelle Lenel and Nicolas Marquis** also examine the conditions for the success of early childhood education and care methods inspired by cognitive neurosciences. They first offer a comparison of the Danish and French-speaking backgrounds that attests to the persistence of specific traditions, although it shows that both areas have been undergoing a strong “schooling process”. Why are references to neurosciences much more frequent in the French-speaking area? Through an analysis of field research conducted with teachers and coaches, they develop the hypothesis that the local success of this language game can be explained by the ability of neurosciences to reconcile the strictly academic requirements and the socio-pedagogical requirements that pre-school institutions traditionally set for themselves – in other words, by equating well-being and performance.

7.2. Autonomy under (self-)control? Social and emotional (in)competencies

The second part deals with the inescapable reference to what seems to act as a measurable materialization of an autonomous behaviour: relational (social and emotional) skills, for which the demand is said to be on the rise both for adults and children. Because skills and competencies are emic and academic categories, the first goal of this part is to provide an overview of the sociological resources available to investigate this demand for social skills and the transformations of the behaviours that are expected of children, but also of people who work with children. The second goal is to investigate empirically the common-sense meanings of being socially skilled or not and the practices that are developed to bolster such skills.

Based on the observation of a growing demand for social skills in the fields of intervention on others, **Sune Qvortrup Jensen and Annick Prieur** draw up an inventory of the sociological theories that enable social skills to be understood. They show that academics are torn between perspectives that analyse the rise in the reference to social skills as responding to comprehensive societal transformations functionally and other perspectives adopting a more critical tone about the consequences of this centrality and the many inequalities or (im)balances of power that it may generate and hide at the same time.

The chapter by **Eva Gulløv** grounds the social changes that form the background of this demand for relational skills empirically. To do this, she examines from a perspective inspired by Elias the new forms of emotional self-control induced by transformations in the upbringing of young children in

Scandinavia. She demonstrates how this self-control entails, for children as well as for adults, two seemingly contradictory movements: the informalization of authority on the one hand, and the formalization of certain types of emotional expression on the other hand. Autonomy is thus neither emancipation nor independence; it is the possession of specific skills such as knowing how to react in various situations. Whilst this leads to important changes in what it means to develop as a child, it also impacts the role of the persons whose role is to guide children's development.

Using results of the ERC project *CoachingRituals*, **Nicolas Marquis and Solène Mignon** focus on a central group of actors involved in enhancing skills, namely, coaches in the parenting field. They show how coaches, in claiming to enhance competencies for parents, children and future coaches alike, try to recognize and develop the value of each person's instinctive "common sense". This helps coaches to tell parents that they are themselves the experts but at the same time they might need some things provided by a coach's expertise. This pragmatic posture also allows coaches to stay away from burning public controversies.

7.3. Shaping autonomy makers? Paradoxes in institutional guidance for parents and teachers

How autonomous should the people whose role is to build autonomous individuals be? The contributions in the third part of this book focus on the paradoxes associated with being a parent or a teacher in these new configurations. As autonomy builders, both figures are the focus of public policies and of street-level bureaucrats and professionals. These policies have evolved with time. The four chapters describe how, nowadays, many expectations rest on the shoulders of teachers and parents, who may even be confronted with intrusive monitoring of their ability to build autonomous children and pupils.

Taking a socio-historical perspective, **Claude Martin** provides an overview and a genealogy of parenting support policies that emerged in many countries at the end of the 20th century. He distinguishes three main periods and examines the paradoxes generated by these policies in the most recent one, given that they promote children's autonomy by supervising and controlling the parent practices. He also shows that references to neurosciences recently played a very important role in the current policy focus on the affective dimension of parenting.

Further on the parenting scene, **Ellie Lee** also questions the intertwining of moral and scientific discourse when it comes to policies intended to regulate the drinking behaviour of pregnant (or even pregnant-to-be) women. Through an analysis of English policy documents about Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, she shows that, while the "autonomy" category is emphasized, women are ultimately left little choice.

Allan Westerling then investigates how Danish policies regulating parenthood play out at the very hands-on level of parent-school interactions when it comes to children's transition to upper classes. He analyses how the parent's role as an autonomy-builder is negotiated with school professionals and how parents from different background try to win back some agency in the face of professionals' standardized criteria.

Finally, **Héloïse Durler** shows through ethnographic studies in Switzerland how the demand for autonomy has conquered all levels of schooling, with paradoxical consequences for teachers, pupils

and parents alike. This pervasive reference to autonomy also establishes specific, constrained forms of learning and requires the actors, especially pupils, truly to desire what is in fact, imposed on them.

7.4. Diagnosing the effects of autonomy? Transformations of mental health suffering in liberal-individualistic societies

In common-sense discussions, autonomy is associated with a burden placed on people and, at the same time, a promise of individual well-being. In the same way, the language games of mental health and illness, which have become a modern idiom, are concurrently considered as an obligatory way of expressing oneself. Taking psychic suffering and mental health as socio-anthropological objects, the last part of this volume focuses more specifically on the complex relationships between the promise of autonomy and mental health language games, diagnoses, shaping of psychic suffering and mental disorders. It shows how people are invited to consider any element an opportunity to work on themselves, and how stigmas traditionally associated with individual singularities are being reversed – with limited success.

Anders Petersen offers a sociological diagnosis of the growth of mental disorders, particularly anxiety and depression among young people. He takes aim at the overall critical tone of studies in this field, and shows through an empirical perspective how young people perceive antidepressant medication and make it part of their identity. Still, he asks, what kind of identity is promoted by these “initiative pills” in what he calls the “achievement society”?

Starting from ERC *CoachingRituals* project results, **Fanny Charrasse and Nicolas Marquis** focus on the recent revival of another set of substances in mental health care: psychedelics. Through interviews with caregivers and guides who use psychedelics with patients, they show that the ability of those who are promoting them to make their use compatible with contemporary ideals of autonomy and especially the idea that good care implies empowering the person are essential in the (re)legitimization of psychedelics.

Ashley Frawley, Ken McLaughlin and Chloe Wakeham examine the systemic effects of therapeutic entrepreneurship in the UK university environment. While there is an ever-growing preoccupation with students’ “mental health”, the bodies that are supposed to provide support tend to pass the buck to other instances, which rarely results in effective care but rather in advice to constantly seek external guidance.

Finally, drawing on the *CoachingRituals* project, **Nicolas Marquis, Alex Maignan and Chloé Daelman** compare two rising and “alternative” categories in the field of mental health and psychiatry: high sensitivity and voice hearing. Both aim to reverse stigma and promote neurodiversity. The chapter shows how the background of this process lies in the blurring between the vocabularies of mental health and disability and the valorization of a social model of disability. It also examines how moral entrepreneurs of these categories have to navigate between a naturalist and a constructivist perspective.

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