

Against Autonomy

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We do things that are bad for us—we take risks we soon regret, we thwart our own desires, we undercut our own fulfillment. Should we be stopped?

On the one hand, we value our liberty, and resent being told what to do. On the other, we often regret the choices that have diminished the quality of our lives. In such cases, we may well wish we had been stopped, given the costs of our actions. The question I address here is whether society—typically in the form of government legislation—should step in, and make people do what is better for them. I will argue that, in many more cases than we now allow, it should; that preserving our liberty of action is not worth the costs of exercising choice. I argue, then, against autonomy.

The term ‘autonomy’ may refer to many distinct concepts, but what I argue against is what Joel Feinberg has called “[t]he kernel of the idea of autonomy ... the right to make choices and decisions—what to put in my body, what contacts with my body to permit, where and how to move my body through public space, how to use my chattels and personal property, what personal information to disclose to others, what information to conceal, and more.”ⁱ Whereas Feinberg argues that this ability to live according to the choices one has made is a core value that must be preserved, however, I will argue that it is something that has been over-valued. Studies in behavioral economics and social psychology show that our ability to make good instrumental choices is often, and

predictably, very poor, and allowing us to act on such choices serves only to obstruct our reaching our long-term goals. While in some cases autonomous action does no harm, in other cases it does, however “harm” is construed—as detrimental to happiness, detrimental to material survival, or even detrimental to the promotion of autonomous action. When we see how poor we are at making instrumental decisions, and how much we suffer from bad instrumental decisions, we will see that the idea that we should respect our autonomy rests on a misconception: that respecting autonomy allows persons to do what they want. In fact, it allows them to go astray, and to do themselves injury, and this is something we need, in many areas, to prevent.

ⁱ Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Self: The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 54.