

Ethical And Moral Autonomy With Regard To Living And To Dying

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Autonomy, practices of autonomy are often conceived as practices of good life. The point of departure in this article is that a good, autonomous life also includes a good, autonomous death, over which people retain as much control as possible. The theme of a good, autonomous death is often discussed at the same time as the theme of a completed life. These two concepts will be examined in more detail, and the social conditions for autonomy as well. The notion of autonomous personality with free will is being challenged in various ways. It follows from this that the concept of will must also be questioned. An autonomous life, a good life and a good death associated with it, also raise questions about ethics and morality, and their relationship. How can Ricoeur's work help us with questions about a good autonomous death, in relation to the other?

Keywords: Ricoeur, autonomy, self-determination, will, living, dying, death, ethics, morals

Autonomy and practices of autonomy are often conceived as practices of life, of the good life. The point of departure in this article is that a good, autonomous life also includes a good, autonomous death, over which people retain as much control as possible. The theme of a good, autonomous death is often discussed at the same time as the theme of a completed life. A completed life should be followed by a good, autonomous death. That begs the question of what a completed, fulfilled life is. Which conditions must then be met? These two concepts, the fulfilled, completed life and autonomy are often associated with each other. Both these concepts need to be examined in more detail.

Autonomy is self-determination, following one's own will. This requires self-examination, self-exploration, and self-observation. We will also discuss the social conditions for autonomy. The notion of autonomous personality with free will is coming under pressure in various ways, for example through data provided by the neurosciences, but also through social-philosophical and political-philosophical approaches that emphasize the social and political context of human action, where it is the group that is characterized by agency and morality rather than the individual.

It follows from this that the concept of will must also be questioned and also the possibility of ethics and morality, that arises if willing is possible. An autonomous life, a good life and a good death associated with it, also raise questions about ethics and morals, and their relationship.

How can Ricoeur's work help us with questions about a good autonomous death? I would first like to discuss the concept of autonomy in Ricoeur. Then I shall discuss his approach to self-determination, or how Ricoeur can answer the question, his approach to ethics and morality (his little ethics), that can also apply to a good autonomous death.

Autonomy

In Ricoeur, autonomy is closely linked to identity, that means to the attempt to discover the

characteristics that allow us to recognize something as being the same.

In his early work *Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (1950)[1], Ricoeur extensively addressed the question of free will. He tempered the prevailing idealism of free will at the time. The unconscious is very important, unconscious desires of the body, which turn into motives. He aims to bring together body and will, and also body and cogito[2]. His basic principle is the reciprocity of the willing and the unwilling. He explores the complexity of the relationship between body and the total field of motivation[3], but sees the body as a source of motives[4].

In *Le conflit des interprétations* (1969)[5], for Ricoeur, raising the question of the subject meant "putting a question mark" on philosophies that move from the subject's reflection on itself and from the subject's positing by itself, an original, fundamental and creative act. Instead, he emphasizes that each expression of the Cogito involves a reinterpretation of the previous one. For Ricoeur, subjectivity is not the ultimate basis, as is the case with Husserl. In *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud* (1965)[6], Ricoeur goes along with psychoanalysis that emphasizes the impulsive, the unconscious. Crucial here is that the cogito can also be regarded as an open question.

In *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990)[7] and other later work, one of the focal points is the subject concept formed by the dialectic of 'ipséité'/selfness and 'mêmeté'/being the same, culminating in his understanding of narrative. According to Ricoeur, the same/idem/ sameness is the equivalent of a permanence in time; we can think here of our genetic code or our fingerprint, or our character. But we also see the changes in, for example, mood, passions, and convictions. That is why Ricoeur also distinguishes identity as ipse. Ricoeur is concerned with the dialectic between idem and ipse, which emerges in stories/narratives.

The relationship of the self and the other is in the context of a reflection on the relationship of the self - as a narrative subject - to the story, and thus to oneself. The subject enters the story, gets his/her self ('soi') out of the story. By (further) telling the story as its own story, the 'soi' withdraws from its (own) story.

But the dialectic of 'ipséité' and 'mêmeté' is only half of Ricoeur's discourse on selfhood. The dialectic of the self ('soi') and the other/e ('l'autre') is the other half. 'Ipséité' is not solipsistic, sovereign, or solitary, but recognizes itself through the other; it is also about that dialectic, so a dialectic between the self and the other. We can also say it like this. In Ricoeur's dialectic of the self and the other, 'ipse' is inseparable from a dual alterity, the alterity in/of the self, and the alterity of other selves. Narrativity is also the connecting link here.

This dialectic of the self and the other is closely linked to practical wisdom, which focuses on themes such as care, self-respect, respect for the other, respect for the law, and responsibility[8].

Ricoeur's understanding of the narrative subject aims to provide a counterbalance to the classical, autonomic subject or 'subjectivism'. Summing up with regard to the question of autonomy, we may say that, according to Ricoeur, the idea of a center of action that makes its own decisions and is responsible for it must be maintained in some way. So we must beware of exaggerated views on human autonomy. Within society we postulate as much of autonomy as is necessary to maintain a reasonable society.

Self-determination, Control, Motives

No absolute autonomy; next, an important question is: What is a good, autonomous death? And what does 'control over death' mean? The question of absoluteness, which applied to autonomy, must also be put to free will. And secondly, we must ask whether we can speak of 'wanting to die'.

How can Ricoeur help us further here?

I would first like to discuss Ricoeur's approach to the will.

In *Le volontaire et l'involontaire* Ricoeur he joins existential anthropology and makes his own contribution to it in his analysis of the will process in the various stages of decision-making, acting and consenting. In all these forms of will, the involuntary is opposed to the voluntary. The will is not sovereign. Moreover, that involuntary is not something that stands outside us as an objective opposite. He argues a dialectic of the voluntary and the involuntary. This dialectic has an inaccessible limit.

The subject here is a combination of a body of nature and of an organ of my will to act or of my freedom. My - natural - body is a source of motives. As such, it is original, irreducible, involuntary. I am not a perfectly enlightened freedom but Ricoeur assumes a potential self that can design a possible action.[9] The emotion must also be seen in close connection with motives of the will. The emotion brings out a vitality inherent in the body.[10]

As a form of freedom that exists despite the involuntary and the definiteness, Ricoeur does indicate the attention. We are free to shift our focus. Ricoeur sees the attention as a function to clarify our motives. This makes alternatives possible, which ultimately lead to the choice. For Ricoeur, freedom is the possibility to weigh motives against each other and to shift attention to motives.[11]

In *Le volontaire et l'involontaire*, in the process of decision-making, bodily particulars, such as needs, pleasure and pain, become motives. My body is a source of motives and as such it is primordial, irreducible, and *involuntary*. I am not a perfectly enlightened freedom; temporality belongs to my physical situation. Human temporality is connected with confusion of motives emanating from the body. I am a freedom that incessantly springs from vagueness or indecision.

In *Le conflit des interprétations*, Ricoeur states that he starts from the *realism of the drives* and the *idealism of the representation of drives*, whereby the hermeneutic interpretation is important. Self-awareness is not everything.[12]

We mentioned a second question for this section: Can we speak of 'wanting to die'? The underlying question is 'Can we know death?', because if not, what is the will directed to? Various philosophers teach us that death is the most inscrutable phenomenon in human existence. We find this, for example, in Vladimir Jankélévitch, who distinguishes between death in the first, second and third person.[13] The first person perspective is always in the here and now. But my death is never in the here and now. Only the certainty of our mortality can be part of this here and now. He writes about the mysterious mortal truth of the person. And he also states that the thought which thinks the immortality of universal life and of universal being itself escapes death.[14] And also Hans George Gadamer, for example, raises the issue in his essays "Der Tod als Frage" (1975)[15] and "Die Erfahrung des Todes" (1983) [16]. He argues that any attempt in philosophy to think death in life, in fact does not think about death, but at most how people deal with death in life, and he also shows this by means of literature.[17] Knowing death through reason is very difficult. According to Gadamer, death has a necessary incomprehensibility. "So seems das Denkend-Sein der Grund für die Unbegreiflichkeit des Todes zu sein und zugleich das Wissen um diese Unbegreiflichkeit zu enthalten." [18] Even if the experience of death is taken as the starting point, death and life are linked, and so this starting point also has its limitations. Here, too, death is thought away.[19] Gadamer points out that repression is the will of life. Thinking of death gets in the way of thinking of the future.[20] There is a deep connection between knowing about death and knowing about one's own finiteness on the one hand, and not wanting to know about death on the other.[21]

Ricoeur does not deal so much with the question of whether we can know death; he focuses mainly on what death means in life, following Heidegger's concept of 'Being toward-Death'.^[22] He focuses in particular on the disappearance of the self and on detachment. Ricoeur wouldn't be Ricoeur if he didn't put hope in return. "But there is the trace of others, to which mine do link up in some way. this is part of the hope that mine will survive."^[23]

If we cannot know death, where is the will directed? What does someone who says he wants to die want? Ricoeur's emphasis on motives and on human values in the phenomenon of 'wanting' is important to us here. In wanting to die, in deciding oneself about dying, the — incomprehensible — death itself is not central, although that will be the end result. There are (other) motives in the choice to die that are important, including, for example, the motive to uphold human dignity.

Emotions are associated with making one's own decision about dying. Ricoeur also considers emotion as an important dimension of the dialectic of the voluntary and the unwilling. But what is striking is that in Ricoeur's early work the will has been little associated with social forces that can limit or promote the will. It is true that from the outset he placed man in the world, but he hardly elaborated on that world and the interaction between man and world. The social dimension does come into play in his ethics and morals. We'll get into that now.

Little Ethics, Ethics And Morals

The species, including the human species, survives through the group. Norms and normative behaviors are aimed at cooperation and survival. Yet Ricoeur says in *Ce qui nous fait penser. La nature et la règle* (1998) also that the norm, morality, and rationality are the human values that human must uphold for himself. Although evolution is a social process, Ricoeur nevertheless juxtaposes the normative discourse with the social evolution discourse, which is primarily concerned with survival. The normative must regulate social needs and desires in order to live in social fairness, in peace.^[24] We are participants in the practice in which free will is assumed, and we can only discuss the justification of that practice if we see ourselves as participants. It is perhaps not obvious to discern a social dimension in dying, at least not when it comes to self-determination over one's own end. However, we can observe this social dimension in various ways. On the one hand, one's decision about one's own end can be influenced by others; on the other hand, the decision also affects others; one's own end evokes emotions in others.

Summarizing this point, we can say that Ricoeur goes along with evolutionary and neurological explanations for social and normative behavior. But in the end he also attributes to morality and culture a level that exceeds the biological level. Through cooperation and inherent normative behavior man survives as a species, through morality and culture, in which openness and plurality are implied, mankind lives in peace and man realizes himself in a humane way. Those who do not uphold free will dehumanize man and human society.

As indicated, the concept of an autonomous personality with free will is also under pressure from socio-philosophical and political-philosophical approaches that indicate that people act in a social and political context.

How free can the will be on a social level? In his work *Soi-même comme un autre*, especially in his dialectic of the self and the other, Ricoeur elaborates being in the world. Core question in Ricoeur's ethics in this book is the question or the desire of the good or fulfilled life, *with and for others within just institutions*. The free, self-realizing individual cannot do without others and without just institutions.^[25] Also in 'Approches de la personne'^[26] Ricoeur gives the following three-part definition of the ethical person:

- wish for a fulfilled life

- with and for others
- in just institutions.

The good life is not restricted to interpersonal relationships. Equality – in the Greek sense of *isotes* – and (juridical) justice belonging to it, both on the level of the institutions, are added to care on the interpersonal level by Ricoeur. Equality and justice may be conceived as an extension of the good (associated with justice of feeling of justice by Ricoeur) that is aimed on the level of interpersonal relationships. He emphasizes that those three levels cannot exist without each other.[\[27\]](#)

It is not the autonomous individual but the self-in-relation that is the focus of analysis. The ‘autonomy of the self’ is linked to caring for the other. Ricoeur connects self-esteem with caring for others. I cannot have a sense of self without valuing others as myself. ‘As myself’ here means that you (the other) are also able to start something in the world, to act for a reason, to set your priorities, the goals of your actions to evaluate, and, having done so, value yourself as I value myself. The emergence of self-esteem does in fact involve a dialogical dimension, absent from modern philosophies of the individual. The responsibility directed towards the other implies the multiple recognition where the other determines self-esteem and self-respect. Here we see the intersubjective social character of the will, in which a certain determinism can be present, but also a certain autonomy is implied. The decisions about one’s own life and about one’s own dying are taken in the social context of the social debate on this subject, and in dialogue with immediate others.

In Ricoeur ethics refer to the esteem of the self or the self-esteem while morality refers to respect. From this Ricoeur argues the mutual implication between self-esteem and the ethical evaluation of these actions of us that are focused on the ‘good life’ (in Aristotle’s sense), and also the relationship between self-respect and the moral evaluation of these similar actions (in the Kantian sense). Summarized: self-esteem and self-respect define the ethical and moral dimension of selfhood, in the extent that these ones characterize the human beings as subjects of ethical-juridical accountability.

In this line Ricoeur attempts to transcend the subject who only acts out of duty (the moral subject) through self-design. He is mainly concerned with self-esteem, because of his close relationship with ‘*ipséité*’.[\[28\]](#) He aims a reformation of ethics and morality in the ‘little ethics’. So Ricoeur refuses a gap between ethics and morality. On the one hand he thinks all ethics having to pass the criticism of the universal norm, on the other hand, according to him, morality has to return to ethics because ethics encloses morality. One may take advantage of the plural character of the ethical public debate where the political/social-judgment-in-situation takes place.

Through Aristotle’s good life and Kant’s morality at the end Ricoeur reaches what he calls the moral-judgment-in-situation, or in Aristotle’s terms ‘*phronésis*’. On the basis of Aristotle’s book VI of the *Ethica* he points out the lines of ‘*phronésis*’ and of ‘*phronimos*’, what he also calls ‘little ethics’, practical wisdom, that is the type of knowledge that is gained in dealing with insights provided by centuries of experience, by traditions. Practical wisdom, is the art of mediating the particular requirement of the (Aristotelian) ethical aim and the universal requirement of the (Kantian) moral norm in order to achieve happiness, autonomy, and justice. Ricoeur writes about dialectic, dialectic of ethics and morality that dissolves in the moral-judgment-in-situation. In ‘little ethics’ a situated judgement comes to the fore at the interface of lines of interpretation, on the one hand interpretation of facts and, on the other hand, interpretation of the norm or the argumentation of the norm.[\[29\]](#)

We may ascertain that Ricoeur advocates a practical approach to ethics and he does not strive for absolute morality.

Which moral norm becomes visible regarding autonomy and the good death?

- As Ricoeur sees no absolute morality, we may say that there is no absolute duty to live.
- We should consider a fulfilled life on the three levels used by Ricoeur: has our life been good on a personal level, on an interpersonal level and on a social level? We must also take others into account when answering this question.
- The question of whether we may end our own life must also be weighed up on three levels: is it good and responsible for myself?, are my motives clear to the other person, what is necessary to accept and process it?, is my choice accountable for the society?

Conclusion

What is autonomy? What is a completed life?

The fulfilled, completed life is a life that we – broadly, together with others – have determined for ourselves, that we have experienced as sufficiently meaningful, that has included a respectful attitude towards others, and in which we have been able to live according to ethical principles, values, also on a social level.

Ricoeur's understanding of the narrative subject and of identity helps us, because they offer a counterbalance to the classical, autonomous subject. Summing up with regard to the question of autonomy, we may say that, according to Ricoeur, the idea of a center of action that makes its own decisions and is responsible for it must be maintained in some way. However, we must beware of exaggerated conceptions of human autonomy. Within society we postulate as much of autonomy as is necessary to maintain a reasonable society.

The autonomy of the subject emerges when motives are given for a fulfilled life and for the choice of one's own end of life. That choice is not considered impossible because one would not know death. Not knowing death is not an obstacle in Ricoeur's line in motives concerning one's own end of life.

Ricoeur has also shown us that the 'autonomy of the self', and the associated sense of self-esteem, must be linked to the concern for the other and to the right of each individual. The emergence of self-esteem actually involves a dialogical dimension. The responsibility directed towards the other implies the multiple recognition while the other determines self-esteem and self-respect. Here we see the intersubjective and social character of the will. Reasons are culturally transmitted and socially embedded in social institutions and expectations of behavior supported by sanctions.

With the responsibility for the other and with the relationship of the self to oneself, we have entered the field of ethics. Ricoeur tries to transcend the subject who only acts out of duty (the moral subject). He is mainly concerned with self-esteem, because of his close relationship with 'ipséité'. Ricoeur emphasizes the necessity of recognizing the self-constancy by the self as the other he/she appears to have become. When it comes to questions about the end of our life, honesty and openness with regard to others are important.

We saw that Ricoeur refuses a gap between ethics and morality. This implies several levels of morality. The one-to-one relationship lacks a third party. It is important to see that third party as well. We also have to deal with society and the legal system that applies there. We not only have a relationship with the direct other, but also with third parties, we are citizens with fellow citizens, the rules of which are laid down in law. It must therefore be about the right balance of legal responsibility, solidarity and risk. We must act in such a way that we hold our citizenship accountable, including to those who come after us.

We follow Ricoeur in his practical approach to ethics and in his rejection of absolute morality. This

also has consequences for a closer reflection on the ethical values and moral norms that are relevant to autonomous death. The assessment of whether life is fulfilled, and the assessment of one's own end, should not be made according to fixed morals, but in a responsible manner.

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Notes

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