

Kantianism, Pragmatism, and Autonomy

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Although the Greek roots of the word autonomy militate against attributing its invention to Immanuel Kant, it would not be a stretch to argue that Kant created a metaphysics and moral philosophy that gave birth to and insisted upon a level of autonomy not seen in prior philosophical systems. The essence of moral action insofar as it is moral for Kant is found in its autonomy. A moral agent must act purely out of respect for the moral law and only out of such respect in order for an action to count as within the bounds of morality at all. Similarly, Kant grounds the dignity that humans manifest as rational beings in their ability to employ autonomous reason rather than being subject to the vicissitudes of impulse as are, apparently, non-rational brutes. The Kantian idea of autonomy is probably as important a concept for the development of the concept of the modern human and its requisite demands for dignity as any other we are likely to find.

And yet such a high and pure standard creates a problem when it comes to articulating a naturalistic philosophy like pragmatism. The pragmatic principle militates against the very idea of “a thing in itself” apart from one’s experience of it, the very notion that Kant invoked in his critical philosophy in order to preserve a domain for autonomy to reside. Birthed in response to the discovery of evolution by natural selection, pragmatism can’t but see human beings as evolved creatures who must cope in a world of pushes and pulls of impulse and desire and who, as such, have no access to any kind of domain of pure reason or motive. The very idea of a separate realm of autonomous reasons or actions violates the pragmatic principle of continuity on a couple of levels. First, it is difficult to see how anything like autonomy could evolve or fit into a system of natural selection whose very nature is defined by the concept of fitness, that is, the relevance of a given choice or adaptation for a specific, local end that is conditioned by the needs and interests of the organism. Second, it is difficult to see what difference the existence of a pure reason (even a pure practical reason) or a noumenal self could make in a naturalistically constrained world. Finally, the pragmatic principle of continuity recognizes the evolutionary principle of conservation of means. That is, any higher mechanism of reason must be built out of parts that were evolved for simpler functions, thus giving the lie to the faculty psychology at the heart of the Kantian system. A final friction between pragmatism and Kantian autonomy lies in the pragmatists’ tendency to focus upon the malleability of individual-other/organism-environment relations. For the pragmatists there doesn’t seem to be a simple, concrete, whole, separate self as Kant’s notion of autonomy requires. Pragmatists tend to focus on concepts like transaction at the expense of boundaries, fluidity and vagueness at the expense of identity and specificity.

Does this mean that the pragmatist cannot avail herself of the ethically salient notion of autonomy and related conceptions? I think that the answer to this question is no. While the pragmatist will have no recourse with respect to a Kantian conception of autonomy, rooted as it is in a non-naturalistic metaphysics replete with discontinuities the pragmatist simply can’t accept, there is another conception of autonomy that is available to pragmatists that might be used to shore up some of the weaker aspects of pragmatic thought at least when it

comes to criticisms that might be leveled against it by those with Kantian concerns. What I have in mind is the concept of “biological autonomy” as articulated by Francesco Varela.

One background assumption for my argument is that pragmatism has been fruitfully stimulated by concepts arising from biology, evolution in particular. Dewey (1983) and others (e.g., Popp 2007), of course, have had a lot to say about the influence of Darwinian evolution on the development of pragmatism in general and on Dewey’s thought in particular. Trevor Pearce (2014) has pointed out that key Deweyan concepts such as organism and environment are traceable in Dewey’s work to the influence of Hegel on writers such as Caird and Alexander, rather than Darwin. In any case, what is clear is that evolutionary biology has changed significantly since Darwin’s and, indeed, Dewey’s time. Evolutionary theory alone has undergone at least three major new syntheses: Weismannian germ theory, population genetics, and the discovery of the structure of the double helix. Moreover, biological theory has benefited from developments in other fields such as systems theory and second order cybernetics that did not exist when Dewey wrote. An important development in this direction has been the concept of “autopoiesis” contributed by Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. The idea here isn’t that pragmatism must be “biologized” or limited to concepts deriving from biological inquiry but rather that it is already a biological philosophy that has been and might continue to be fruitfully stimulated by such concepts.

In this paper I explain Varela’s concept of “autonomy” as it emerges in the context of his thinking about “biological unities”. I then explore the potential and the difficulties of using this concept to do the kind of work that philosophical autonomy does in the Kantian system. I conclude by noting the potential but also pitfalls for this concept when reappropriated by pragmatist philosophers. In general, my claim is that concepts such as biological autonomy and autopoiesis are useful for situating and updating the naturalistic project of pragmatism so long as one keeps in mind the dangers of biologizing the humanities and/or reducing the unique situatedness of human beings to the situation of non-human biological organisms.