

# ACCURATE SELF-ASSESSMENT, AUTONOMOUS IGNORANCE, AND THE APPRECIATION OF DISABILITY

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IN THEIR THOUGHTFUL commentaries on our essay, “Knowing your own strength: Accurate self-assessment as a requirement for personal autonomy,” George Agich, Ruth Chadwick, and Dominic Murphy (2004) provide both criticisms and insights that give us a context in which to clarify further our claim that one’s autonomy is impaired when one is unable to appreciate whether one has the capacities required for tasks one is undertaking. We focus on two issues: the extent to which our account of autonomy suggests a problematically “externalist” or “objective” approach and the issue of whether our talk of accurate self-assessment entails an overdemanding requirement that one know numerous facts about oneself to count as autonomous.

## THE EXTERNAL POINT OF VIEW

For many, the idea that specific regions of the brain might be relevant to a person’s autonomy evokes nightmarish, startlingly reductionist visions of a world in which informed consent is decided on the basis of neuroimaging. In arguing

that a capacity for self-assessment is both essential for autonomy and presupposes executive function that is often impaired by prefrontal damage, we do not wish to engage in such reductionism by suggesting that there is any straightforward, one-to-one mapping comparable to that presupposed by the nightmare scenarios. Given what we know about the brain’s plasticity, the prospects (although limited at present) for neurorehabilitation, multiplicity of the instantiation of autonomy-related capacities, and, especially, the constitutively moral/normative dimensions of these capacity concepts, such mappings are clearly problematic. This is true even in the easy cases, which, as Murphy points out, include our case of “John.” This is all the more true with regard to the more complicated psychiatric cases, including disorders such as depression where the normative dimensions and the greater interpretive leeway in diagnosis preclude reductionist solutions (See Anderson 2004). For these reasons and for independent philosophical reasons, we are uncomfortable with the label “externalist,”

although we acknowledge and confirm our view that externally applied neuroscientific notions—and evidence—can inform these matters. Nonetheless, we do not wish to argue for a fully externalist point of view, especially when paired with the idea that we are advocating a “smooth naturalistic picture of the cognitive basis of autonomy” (Murphy XX<EQ>). Murphy puts us in some terrific company with the likes of John Doris, Shaun Nichols, and—we would add—himself, and this is welcome and flattering. But, to avoid any misunderstanding of an issue that we do not actually take up in our essay, we should caution that we do not endorse a program of naturalizing the normativity on which many of central autonomy-related concepts are based. The notion, for example, of what it is to assess competently one’s chances of success cannot be replaced with a set of nomological regularities or a self-applying list of necessary and sufficient conditions.

#### APPRECIATING DISABILITY AND KNOWING THE FACTS

One of the central challenges we face in presenting our approach is to distinguish our requirement of “accurate self-assessment” from an implausible requirement that one have no false beliefs about one’s capacities. In different ways, all three commentaries make it clear that our argument would benefit from further clarification of this distinction.

In her commentary, Chadwick suggests that our approach may commit us to requiring too much self-knowledge, specifically, that it seems to require accurate knowledge of things like our genetic makeup as a requirement for autonomy. To begin with, it is worth underscoring again that the requirement we have introduced is explicitly task specific: we are focused here on whether an agent has an understanding of things that are relevant for undertaking an intended task, and declarative knowledge of facts, genetic or otherwise, about oneself are relevant only insofar as they bear on that understanding.

But Chadwick’s point clearly goes deeper. In that regard, it is particularly important to underscore that ours is actually a requirement that has

less to do with knowing facts—even task-specific ones—about oneself and much more to do with having the ability to incorporate available facts about oneself into one’s decision making about and execution of an intended action. It is this ability to integrate self-knowledge with self-initiated action that is critical to what we have called accurate self-assessment, not the possession of the knowledge itself. Here, for example, we welcome Agich’s emphasis on the “engaged” and “performative” character of the capacity for self-assessment we have in mind.

Nothing we say, for example, commits us to requiring that an agent must know anything at all about her genetic makeup to be autonomous, anymore than it requires her to know, say, what her lung capacity is before undertaking high-altitude mountaineering. What matters to autonomy in our view is that, if her lung capacity has been measured and is known to her, she recognize its relevance to climbing Mt. Everest and be able to take it into account in making her decision to go and in regulating her actions as she climbs, even if she makes a “wrong” decision at some point and perishes. On the other hand, her autonomy is diminished if, through denial, frontal cognitive disorder, or some other mechanism, she is unable to use the relevant information about her lungs that is in her possession, even if she “gets away with it” and successfully summits and descends.

To take another example drawn from Chadwick’s commentary, consider a couple trying to conceive a child. Of course, because one cannot intend a successful action but only an action, knowledge of how things will actually turn out (as opposed to reasonable expectations) is not part of our requirement, but that is not in question here as it was not with the mountaineering example. However, suppose it is the case that the man in the couple is sterile. Clearly, this is relevant to their plans, but are either of them truly less autonomous in their child-conceiving pursuits for not knowing this? We would not want to argue here that they are, for all we are actually committed to is this: if the sterility diagnosis is available and these individuals cannot appreciate its relevance for their undertaking, then their

autonomy is to that extent impaired. But that seems anything but counterintuitive. This is, after all, why delusional behavior is not autonomous.

Chadwick also raises the interesting question of whether one could autonomously desire not to have information that might enhance an accurate self-assessment of a relevant capacity. Here one can imagine two sorts of cases. First, one might want to remain unaware on the grounds that knowing about one's disability might make one less effective in achieving the goal in question. This is the sort of case we discuss in responding to the objection that knowing the truth about oneself can be demoralizing. In the second sort of case, one has independent reasons—happiness, for example—for not wanting to know. In this case, it is possible that one makes an autonomous decision to deny oneself the means for being more self-governing in a particular domain. This is like the question of whether one can voluntarily chose slavery or autonomously choose to reduce one's autonomy. And we see no reason to rule this out in principle.

#### SELF-CORRECTION IN LIGHT OF EXPERIENCE

A similar point comes up in Murphy's commentary. For although he is clear on the task specificity of our proposal, he expresses a worry similar to Chadwick's when he writes, "A false belief about the sources of one's behavior certainly looks like inaccurate self-assessment" (XX<EQ>). And it is this worry that leads Murphy to suggest that we have misplaced the focus on self-knowledge rather than adaptive capacities: "It is not necessary to be accurate about how one's mind works, as long as one can adjust one's plans and actions in the light of its workings" (XX<EQ>). This has a very appealing pragmatist ring to it, and we are in agreement with Murphy as to the on-the-fly character of much of the self-adjustment that goes into autonomous action. But following Murphy's proposed alternative would lead us to lose sight of an important distinction between X and Y. Perhaps an example can bring this out. Consider two individuals having difficulties fitting a peg into a

hole. The first individual tries to fit a square peg in a round hole; the relevant capacity called for here is, as Murphy suggests, the ability to revise one's plans in light of the experience; she needs to try putting the peg in a different hole. A second individual, by contrast, has coordination difficulties and a shaky hand; here, however, no adjustment of plans will be possible without appreciating one's disability: what this individual needs to understand is that the problem is not with the pegs but with one's own agility. In cases of this sort (and they are, after all, our explicit focus), it is simply not the case, as Murphy suggests, that "Effective response to experience is compatible with failures of self-assessment . . ." (XX<EQ>).

#### ACCURATE SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A MUNDANE, ENGAGED CAPACITY

The two critical issues that we have focused on here—charges of a problematic, implicit externalism and an overdemanding requirement that one "know the facts"—are nicely interwoven in George Agich's commentary. As he discerns, we are keen to emphasize the flexible, everyday, performative character of self-assessment. His concern, however, is that our terminology "seems to run in a different direction" (XX<EQ>). To some extent, this may simply be a function of the conflicting resonances that are generated in interdisciplinary work. But Agich raises an important concern in focusing on our requirement that the standard for "accurate" self-assessment be "objective."

Here it would be useful to separate two issues perhaps more clearly than we have done in our original statement. First, there is the issue of whether an agent's knowledge of his task-relative capability is available to her in acting. This is what we tried to emphasize in speaking of an agent's "sense" of her capacity. Here we agree entirely with Agich that "Accurate self-assessment should thus be conceptualized as a complex process that involves 'feedback' mechanisms or reflexivities, which are primarily actional or practical" (Agich, XXX <EQ>). A second and distinct issue, however, is the question of how we understand "accuracy." And here some distance

for the agent's own perspective is crucial. The subject's own "sense" of capacity is not self-verifying. Thus, when assessing whether someone's self-assessment is accurate, we must rely with standards and measures that are nonsubjective—indeed, as Agich notes, "intersubjective." Once these motivational-agentic and normative issues are distinguished, however, the terminology is perhaps less misleading.

These three commentaries have raised numerous further issues that we have not had the space to address here. We have, in any event, benefited greatly from them. Clearly, work remains to be done to further develop this requirement of accurate self-assessment. And we are very appreciated of the various ways in which these commentaries have already advanced the discussion.

#### REFERENCES

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