

**A Self-Determination Theory account of Self-Authorship:  
Implications for Law and Public Policy**

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## Abstract

Self-authorship has been established as the basis of an influential liberal principle of legislation and public policy. Being the author of one's own life is a significant component of one's own well-being, and therefore, is better understood from the viewpoint of the person whose life it is. However, most philosophical accounts, including Raz's conception of self-authorship, rely on general and abstract principles rather than specific individual psychological properties of the person whose life it is. We elaborate on the principles of self-authorship on the basis of Self-Determination Theory, an empirically-based psychological theory that has been at the forefront of the study of autonomy and self-authorship for more than 45 years. Our account transcends distinctions between positive and negative freedom and attempts to pinpoint the exact properties of self-authorship within the psychological processes of intrinsic motivation and internalization. If a primary objective of public policy is to support self-authorship, then it should be devised on the basis of how intrinsic motivation and internalization can be properly supported. Self-Determination Theory identifies three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. The satisfaction of these needs is associated with the support and growth of intrinsic tendencies and the advancement of well-being. Through this analysis, we can properly evaluate the significance of rationality, basic goods and the availability of options to self-authorship. Implications for law and policy are discussed with an emphasis on legal paternalism and what many theorists call "liberal perfectionism", that is, the non-coercive support and promotion of the good life.

*Keywords:* self-determination theory; self-authorship; autonomy; well-being; liberalism; paternalism; perfectionism

## 1. Introduction

A good life can be seen as something of obvious value: it is a fundamental pursuit for individuals and a central goal for government policy. At the same time, there are different ways to approach it. Rigidly perfectionist understandings of well-being focus on the advancement of *perfection* for all humans as the most desirable political goal (Hurka, 1993), even conceding that some “coercive discouragement” is justified when their objectively defined well-being is threatened (Finnis, 1987). Less demanding (and more pluralist) accounts focus on the life that is good and fulfilling for the person whose life it is. In this context, well-being is a *prudential value*: it does not have the aesthetic value of a splendid work of art or the moral value of an act of mercy. The fact that such a work of art has aesthetic value or the conviction that being merciful to others is a moral virtue does not necessarily entail that either of them is good *for me*. Many liberals have subscribed to this less demanding view (often labeled “liberal perfectionism”), which explicitly rejects the more traditional liberal idea that the state should be neutral toward the good life and never adopt policies on these perfectionist grounds. Proponents of political neutrality include Ronald Dworkin (1978), Bruce Ackerman (1980), Charles Larmore (1987), Gerald Gaus (1996), and John Rawls (1993).

Despite a strong focus on well-being, liberal perfectionism will not advocate the view that people should be forced in any way to lead good lives. Since people are more likely to lead lives that are valuable *for them* if they are allowed to fashion their lives according to their own views, tastes, and convictions, the good life is associated with autonomous living. There is a strong subjective element in this understanding of personal well-being, despite

the fact that it does not require or entail any form of moral subjectivism. Lifestyles can be objectively good or bad, but, generally speaking, a good life cannot be (at least entirely) dictated from the outside, it cannot be fundamentally alien to the person whose life it is. For liberals, this idea is encapsulated in Mill's harm principle (Mill, 1974), which is, simply put, a rule of thumb to be followed by governments that wish to allow their citizens enough room for autonomously shaping their own lives—a kind of freedom also known as *self-authorship*. The Millian assumption is that, at least in principle, freedom takes priority in all moral and political questions. In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill—an ardent utilitarian with no consideration for “abstract rights”—wrote that “in practical matters, the burden of proof is supposed to be with those who are against liberty” (2010, p. 257). This is an intuition that most people seem to share, at least when contemplating self-authorship in the autonomy-oriented Western world—although the distinction between the West and the rest of the world in this context faces powerful criticism (Nussbaum, 2002).

The focus on self-authorship, however, is not an exclusively utilitarian or consequentialist project. Most theorists who discuss freedom, regardless of their final neutralist or perfectionist prescriptions, seem to initially associate it with the autonomous shaping of one's own life. Of course, Mill is known for defending the view that personal autonomy (although he never used the term) is essential for the maximization of happiness, but other influential theorists offer conceptions of autonomy that depart from Mill's utilitarian approach. John Rawls, for example, constructed a theory of justice with the image of the autonomous person in mind, a

person who desires above all to set and pursue her own plans in life (Rawls, 1971).

Ronald Dworkin, in his earlier writings, speaks of the autonomy of adult citizens

as the “right to make decisions about the character of their lives themselves” (1986, p. 5). Variations of this view have been offered by theorists who understand themselves as liberals both in the direction of a more demanding “principle of restraint” in government interference and in an effort to highlight the importance of positive freedom. The former strategy is most notably followed by philosophers who subscribe to Locke’s views on what we often call “self-ownership” or “self-sovereignty” as well as by Kantians and even Millians like Joel Feinberg. The latter task was most notably undertaken by Joseph Raz, who advocated a perfectionist account of personal autonomy as self-authorship (Raz, 1986).

In this article, we intend to explore the notion of self-authorship in terms of both content and value. Despite the ever-growing literature on personal autonomy and self-authorship, the notion remains elusive, partly due to Raz’s own heavily theoretical approach. The celebrated ideal of personal autonomy as self-authorship owes much of its intuitive appeal to an equally intuitively appealing hint about the workings of the human psyche and mind. In what follows, we will attempt to flesh out this intuition drawing on the findings and principles of *self-determination theory* (SDT). Before the end, we will have provided a more concrete account of self-authorship’s content and value as well as a clear picture of its importance for personal well-being and public policy. We will conclude with a discussion of the role law is expected to play in light of the preceding analysis.

## **2. What new does a psychological theory bring into the account of self- authorship?**

### ***2.1. The psychological perspective of self-determination theory***

To understand self-authorship, it is necessary to focus on the life that is good and fulfilling for the person whose life it is. It would surely make sense to adopt a psychological approach that aims to understand human behavior from the lens of the individual. This approach is quite different from the philosophical discussion of autonomy that was briefly outlined above, the primary goal of which is to unravel the properties of autonomy through logical argumentation. Psychology takes a different stand. Argumentation is still present, especially in the construction of hypotheses. However, hypotheses serve as mere starting points. Psychology is devoted to testing these hypotheses in an empirical manner rather than arguing in favor or against them. Laboratory or field experiments and observational and correlational studies aim at establishing whether the researchers' ideas are valid. Even the simplest and most intuitively appealing ideas can be disconfirmed through the empirical method. Much may be said about the validity of this method, but that is how empirical psychology—the greater part of psychology—works.

Self-determination theory is an empirically based psychological theory. What it has to say about autonomy and self-authorship is primarily based on actual

empirical data collected in the laboratory and the field. For instance, in a now classic experiment, Deci (1971) tested the effect of rewarding participants for an intrinsically motivating activity such as playing with a puzzle. Intuitively, someone might presume that adding an external positive reinforcement would increase participants' motivation to play with the puzzle. In fact, it had the opposite effect: it decreased participants' intrinsic motivation. In this sense, interfering with an individuals' autonomy, even if it is in the form of rewards, can undermine the expression of natural, intrinsic tendencies. From Deci's (1971) pioneering work to this day, self-determination theory has examined the interaction between the environment and people's natural tendencies and has grown in a variety of fields such as education (Ryan & Deci, 2000), psychotherapy (Ryan & Deci, 2008), organizations (Gagné & Bhave, 2011), physical activity and exercise (Van de Berghe, Vansteenkiste, Cardon, Kirk, & Haerens, 2014), and video games (Rigby & Ryan, 2011).

## ***2.2. Self-determination theory is an organismic theory***

The interaction between person and environment was exemplified in the work of Lewin (1946), often taking the form of the axiomatic equation  $B = f(P, E)$  (behavior is a function of the person and the environment). Different scientific perspectives choose to focus on different aspects of this dynamic approach to behavior. Behaviorists, for example, choose to focus more on the physical environment. Famous behaviorist B.F Skinner argued that, "As we learn more about the effects of the environment, we have less reason to attribute any part of human behavior to an autonomous controlling agent" (1971, p. 101). Skinner thought that all internal states, including autonomy, have no real use in

understanding human behavior. On the other hand, other traditions in psychology choose to focus less on the environment and more on internal psychological states. Humanistic psychology (e.g., Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1961) may focus on conscious desires, whereas psychodynamic theories (e.g., Freud, 1969) may focus on non-conscious mechanisms. In any case, it is evident that, even before gathering data and even before any argumentation, scientists will adopt a specific point of departure and focus on a particular aspect of human behavior. Self-determination theory is no different.

Self-determination theory adopts an organismic approach (Deci, 1980) to the study of human behavior, and more particularly to the study of human motivation. The assumption of the active organism is a point of departure shared by great theorists such as Piaget, Freud, Jung, Maslow, and Rogers (see Ryan, 1995). Under this assumption, human beings are considered active organisms, acting on their internal and external environments on the basis of internal structures that are constantly elaborated and refined with experience (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Offering a motivational account of behavior, self-determination theory is preoccupied with the energy for the development of internal structures that human beings integrate into a unified, coherent structure of the *self*. This energy is referred to as *intrinsic motivation*. Think of babies and their interest in a wide array of stimuli, their effort to conquer challenges, or their tendency to connect to others. As they grow, their intrinsic motivation is channeled toward specific activities and people or is somehow thwarted and lost. Self-determination theory focuses both on the individual and on the environment in order to understand how intrinsic motivation can be supported.

### ***2.3. Self-determination theory is a theory about autonomy***

Intrinsic motivation manifests itself through the person's engagement in inherently enjoyable or interesting activities. When people are intrinsically motivated, they experience enjoyment rather than pressure or tension. The activity is perceived as an end in itself, rather than as a means to an end. One of the questions that concerns SDT is how this can be undermined. Research has shown that external events, such as salient rewards, threats and deadlines, evaluation and surveillance, and lack of choice, consistently undermine people's motivation to perform otherwise engaging activities, primarily due to the individuals' interpretation that the contextual factors, instead of the individuals themselves, are the initiators of behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Autonomy is, of course, a theoretical concept that is used to describe what is undermined by these contextual factors, but the empirical consequences are there; they are real.

The experience of self-determination has empirical, measurable properties that are considered intertwined but may be studied in isolation: perceived choice, volition, and internal perceived locus of causality (Reeve, Nix and Hamm, 2003). *Perceived choice* refers to a subjective feeling of choice while performing an activity instead of an objective number of other options, *volition* to "a sense of unpressured willingness to engage in the activity" (Deci, Ryan, & Williams, 1996, p.165), and the *internal perceived locus of causality* to the subjective perception that a person is an origin of her behavior instead of a pawn (De Charms, 1968). In all cases, the focus is on the experience of the individual rather than some objective outside criterion. With regard to choice, for example, an infinite number of options may seem tyrannical (Schwartz, 2000) or a controlled choice can be ego-depleting (Moller, Deci, & Ryan, 2006). Self-determination theory will emphasize

autonomous choice, that is, the experience of choice combined with an internal perceived locus of causality. Specific measures have been developed that tap into different aspects of self-determination and help us make sense of empirical data and human behavior.

Autonomy support has clear implications in areas besides the strict realm of intrinsic motivation. It facilitates creativity, cognitive flexibility, positive emotional tone, and maintenance of behavior change (Deci & Ryan, 1987). More importantly, it is linked to eudaimonic well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). We may understand more about how this is possible if we take into account that autonomy support is not only valuable for intrinsically motivating activities but is also a clear facilitator for the process of internalization.

The majority of the activities that we engage in are not inherently enjoyable or satisfying. Therefore, there must be other reasons for why we perform them and these are classified along a continuum of autonomy, illustrating different degrees of *internalization*. By definition, activities that are performed for reasons other than the activity itself are considered to be *extrinsically* motivated. Not all extrinsically motivated activities have the same properties, though. Intuitively, we understand that it is different to perform an activity in order to attain an external reward than to uphold values that are personally important to us. Organismic integration theory, one of the mini-theories that comprises self-determination theory, has produced a taxonomy of human motivation on the basis of the way in which different motives relate to the phenomenal core we call the *self*. It proposes six distinct categories of regulation of an activity: *amotivation*, where there is lack of intention to act, *external regulation*, where there is salience of rewards and punishments, *introjected regulation*, where there is focus on approval by self or others and feelings such as guilt and pride dominate,

*identified regulation*, where there is self-endorsement of a goal, *integrated regulation*, where there is synthesis and congruence with a broader system of goals and values, and *intrinsic regulation*, where there is interest and enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Only the latter three forms of motivation are considered autonomous. Special emphasis is often given to introjected regulation, where there is no particular external contingency present. People are instead regulated by an inner control, giving the impression that the regulatory process and the person regulated are separate (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994).

Ryan and Connell (1989) have confirmed the idea that the motivational formulation outlined above lies along a continuum of relative autonomy. They found that external regulation was associated with less interest and value and that introjected regulation was linked to greater anxiety and reduced coping with failure. On the other hand, identified regulation was associated with more enjoyment of life and positive coping styles. The more people move toward more autonomous forms of motivation, such as integrated regulation (Deci et al., 1994), the more they experience an extrinsically motivated activity in a similar manner to intrinsically motivated activities, even though the activity is still performed to attain a separable outcome—rather than being an end in itself.

#### ***2.4. Self-determination theory is not only a theory about autonomy***

One of the most important questions that self-determination theory asks is how it is possible for people to move toward more autonomous types of motivation. Is it simply the absence of rewards and punishments that supports intrinsic motivation and facilitates internalization? In fact, the answer is much more complicated. Self-

determination theory identifies three needs as essential nutrients for growth and integrity: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). *Autonomy* refers to the need to self-organize and regulate one's own behavior, *competence* refers to the need to seek optimal challenges and achieve effectiveness in one's environment, and *relatedness* refers to the need to have intimacy and connectedness. The absence of threats, deadlines, rewards, or punishment may indeed facilitate autonomous regulation, but this factor is related only to the need for autonomy. Competence is also important. People's intrinsic tendencies will be supported by offering optimal challenges and *informational* feedback that will help people grow and master those challenges—in general, to enhance their feeling of competence. Informational feedback is contrasted with controlling feedback that ego-involves people, that is, makes their self-esteem contingent on the achievement of particular outcomes and undermines autonomous regulation (Ryan, 1982). Apart from competence, which plays a central role in autonomous motivation, relatedness plays a more distal role that, when satisfied, serves as a backdrop for autonomous behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

If we view behavior as the result of an interactive process between the self and the environment, self-authored behavior is initiated by the self and not by the environment. Under an organismic approach, the self internalizes aspects of the environment, often integrating them fully, thus making a pure dichotomy between self and environment impossible. We, therefore, must rely more on the subjective experiential qualities of behavior than on crude "objective" distinctions. Any external event is evaluated according to its "functional significance" (Deci & Ryan, 1985), that is, according to the psychological meaning a person gives to that event and may be treated as facilitating or restrictive of self-authorship. On the other hand, it should be noted that even internal events, such as spontaneous

thoughts, may be evaluated as restrictive of self-authorship if they build on introjects and guilt or contingent self-esteem. The “self” of *self*-determination theory does not refer to the person in general but more specifically to the phenomenal *ego-center* that regulates human behavior (Pfander, 1908/1967). Therefore, it is next to impossible to ascertain self-authorship by a simple internal–external event distinction, unless we understand how people give meaning both to internal and external events.

At the same time, each organism is different and incorporates different aspects of the environment. This raises the question of whether any type of behavior might be regarded as autonomous or self-authored—thus introducing a high degree of relativity in the concept of self-authorship. Self-determination theory supports the idea that the process of internalization and intrinsic motivation lies on the same global principles, namely the satisfaction of the three psychological needs. Environments that support these basic nutriments for growth and integrity will in the end support the individuals’ intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways. In the end, self-determination theory offers specific and global guidelines for how an environment should be structured.

### 3. Self-authorship is not independence

There is a strong intuition, especially in autonomy-supporting cultures, in favor of independence and freedom as something of intrinsic value. Outlaws like Jesse James and his brothers became “great American action heroes” (Robinson, 2007, p. 55), simply because they appeared to be utterly free: James was not free in a legal or political sense but rather in a pre-political or “primitive” sense (Williams, 2001). Given that James lived a life of crime and violence and was betrayed and executed by a member of his gang at age 34, it is not immediately evident how this unlimited freedom contributed to a good life. Regardless of how highly James valued his “primitive freedom” and other elements of his life, he may have conceded that his was a short and stressful life with a premature ending. In any case, we should evaluate freedom less in terms of a general objective principle of freedom and more in terms of the subjective experiential properties of autonomy. It is there that we will discover the intrinsic value of freedom.

Autonomy is sometimes construed as a right to rule oneself—a view that accounts for the original meaning of the term (from the Greek word *αυτονομία*: *αυτό* = self and *νόμος* = rule). In this context, autonomy is a strong negative right to non-interference. In Nozick’s defense of self-ownership, respect for certain rights is linked to autonomy as an exercise concept (Nozick, 1974). Joel Feinberg argues for a right to *personal sovereignty*, which he compares to state sovereignty. But then he goes on to explain, through a thorough examination of the boundaries of personal sovereignty, that people need some “breathing space around [their] body, analogous perhaps to offshore fishing rights in the national model” (Feinberg, 1986, pp. 47–48). This space is invaded, according to Feinberg, by even

the slightest interference, just like a state's sovereignty is under attack even when a small fishing boat enters its waters without permission. But if this breathing space is important enough for personal autonomy to warrant this kind of protection, we cannot turn a blind eye on what makes this notion worth its salt. In other words, we should better understand the object of this protection. A person, a homeless beggar for example, can have full personal sovereignty rights to protect her breathing space and yet have no breathing space at all. The same applies to understandings of personal sovereignty based on every individual's right not to have her powers usurped by another (Ripstein, 2006): it is of paramount importance for personal autonomy that people have adequate powers to control their lives; if they do not, any negative right, no matter how strong, will not tell the whole story of autonomous living.

Many philosophical discussions of autonomy see independence as a core element of autonomy. Interestingly, this includes theories of autonomy that fully recognize the significance of other factors, such as the availability of options and opportunities (Colburn, 2011; Raz, 1986; Wall, 1998). From a self-determination theory perspective, a simple absence of interference or dependence would not necessarily characterize self-authorship. Indeed, individuals may willingly and autonomously seek dependence. Autonomy, therefore, should not be equated with the absence of external influences but rather with the assent to those influences (Ryan & Deci, 2006). For instance, one cannot envision a successful close relationship on the basis of detachment, but rather only on the basis of volitional intimacy, connectedness, and interdependence (Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007). Even within interdependent cultures, the need for autonomy will be valued without necessarily endorsing individualism, self-reliance, or independence (Chirkov, 2009; Chirkov, Ryan, & Willness, 2005).

Moreover, prosocial behavior has been found to yield benefits for the helper when performed autonomously and to add to well-being through need satisfaction (Ryan, Curren, & Deci, 2013; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). These points draw a more realistic image of the autonomous person, as they account for the “social aspect” of the options commonly available to people (Raz, 1986; Wall, 1998). In light of the preceding discussion, it is evident that philosophical accounts of self-authorship have room for considerations regarding the impact of our social and cultural environment on the appeal of the choices available to us. Self-determination theory can detach these considerations from an overly rigid understanding of the autonomous person as someone who should, as a matter of principle, be resistant to external stimuli that undermine her freedom. In fact, resistance to interpersonal influence, otherwise labeled “reactive autonomy,” should not be considered real autonomy, whereas “reflective autonomy” captures the essence of the concept (Koestner & Losier, 1996). The idea is also implicit in some discussions of self-authorship that acknowledge the impact of the social aspect of options and will be analyzed further. This discussion allows us to look into the reasons for making a specific choice and to view the environment as a component of people’s autonomous living.

#### **4. Self-authorship and positive freedom—Qualifications for autonomy support**

Joseph Raz describes personal autonomy as follows: “autonomy is opposed to a life of coerced choices. It contrasts with a life of no choices, or of drifting through life without ever exercising one’s capacity to choose” (Raz, 1986, p. 371). He explains that “the autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life” and that “the ideal of personal autonomy is the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through successive decisions throughout their lives” (Raz, 1986, p. 369). This is a very common understanding of personal autonomy in political philosophy. Most prominent liberals, including many we commonly regard as proponents of negative liberty, would not reject the core of Raz’s description. Rawls, for example, discusses the idea that a person’s good is determined by what he understands as his *rational long-term plans*. He goes as far as to say that, after all, “a person may be regarded as a human life lived according to a plan” (Rawls, 1971, pp. 92–93). In a similar vein, Nozick argues that a person must be able to formulate long-term plans and act in accordance with abstract principles and a general picture of what an appropriate life is because “only a being with the capacity to so shape his life can have or strive for a meaningful life” (Nozick, 1974, pp. 49–50). Self-determination theory would further extend this reasoning and suggest that intrinsic goals, such as affiliation, helpfulness, health, and growth, are more likely to serve the organism’s intrinsic tendencies than extrinsic goals such as fame, money, and appealing appearance (Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

This is the core idea of self-authorship: a life in accordance with the principles, values, and choices of the person whose life it is. It requires freedom from undue

external interference (*negative* freedom) but, more importantly, it requires actively making autonomous choices (*positive* freedom). A possible qualification for this kind of life is the *mental capacity* for adopting principles, endorsing values, and making choices. This capacity is described as a kind of “minimum rationality, the ability to comprehend the means required to realize his goals, the mental faculties necessary to plan actions, etc.” (Raz, 1986, p. 373). Rationality could be seen as a necessary condition for the enjoyment of autonomy (Feinberg, 1986). On the level of individual differences, there are people with an autonomous orientation (see Deci & Ryan, 1985) who will tend to seek out opportunities for autonomous behavior. This is not so much a matter of mental capacity as it is of cognitive flexibility and choiceful accommodation of environmental events, although it is true that the selection of self-concordant goals can be a difficult self-perceptual task (Sheldon, 2014). It is also important to note that no one exhibits autonomous motivation and self-authorship all the time, even though people with an autonomy orientation will tend to interpret environmental contingencies as autonomy-supportive. Autonomous motivation will also vary with the activity or the action that is under question. Some activities may be self-authored and some may not, depending on the level of internalization or the existence of intrinsic motivation. This in turn varies with the extent of satisfaction of the three psychological needs with regard to the activity or its broader context. In fact, all factors may co-determine the degree of self-authorship. For example, Hagger and Chatzisarantis (2011) found that people with an autonomy orientation are “protected” by the undermining effect of rewards on intrinsic motivation. It is not, therefore, easy to isolate properties of the individual that are necessary for the enactment of positive freedom, but there seems to be some type of individual capacity that relates to general motivational tendencies. This individual

capacity, the autonomy causality orientation, should be nurtured, especially in the early formative years of development, through the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs.

At the same time, there is a natural, almost self-evident appeal to the view that autonomy is impossible in the absence of certain environmental basic goods—namely, life, bodily health, and integrity. The autonomous person is not one “always struggling to maintain the minimum conditions of a worthwhile life” (Raz, 1986, p. 155). In terms of both moral argument and public policy, it is particularly important that, on this account, extreme material deprivation can undermine autonomy as much as coercion and manipulation (Waldron, 1989). Maslow (1943) also proposes a sequential structure of needs on the basis of a pyramid with successive stages that the individual goes through on the path to self-actualization. He distinguishes among five types of needs: physiological needs, safety needs, love needs, esteem needs, and the need for self-actualization. One cannot move to the next stage without satisfaction of the needs of the previous stage. This hierarchical view of needs is different to the way SDT conceptualizes the three growth-oriented basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Maslow (1943) further recognizes that there are prerequisites to need satisfaction, such as freedom to express oneself and freedom to do as one wishes, as well as desires for exploration which he did not identify as needs per se. Self-determination theory also underscores the centrality of these concepts, which it includes in its conceptualization of needs, and further views basic needs as the necessary conditions of well-being, integrity, and growth. Self-determination theory regards them as significant in all stages of development without offering any prerequisites or end-points (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These psychological needs are significant across the life span of

the individual (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006). Through the lens of SDT, we are able to understand how severe deprivation of certain goods undermines well-being, integrity, and growth by undercutting the ability to engage in meaningful relationships, achieve effectance in one's environment, and autonomously pursue one's life path.

There is also little controversy in the statement that self-authorship requires the availability of options. Unless we have enough options to choose from, we cannot lead autonomous lives. This is a rather common theme in contemporary legal and political philosophy. Raz gives considerable attention to the point that we cannot be autonomous unless we have an *adequate* range of options to choose from. Kymlicka (1991) also emphasizes the importance of enjoying a significant range of options in his discussion of freely chosen activities and their value. The availability of options is a central concern for those theorists whose explorations go beyond an understanding of autonomy as a mere capacity. Whether their interest primarily lies in freedom (Cohen, 1995) or in well-being, most of them recognize that autonomy requires options (Hurka, 1993; Sher, 1997; Wall, 1998). While, however, there is much intuitive appeal to the adequacy of options as a condition of autonomy, due, in part, to its allegiance to *value-pluralism*, there is also much vagueness. Sher (1997) appreciates Raz's point but cannot overlook the obvious question: Which options *are* adequate? The answer to this question will also be (perhaps inevitably) open to the criticism of vagueness, but it can reveal enough about the condition of "having adequate options" to reaffirm the view that a full-blooded account of personal autonomy transcends the distinction between negative and positive liberty.

According to self-determination theory, autonomous behavior is characterized by genuine choice, where a person is able to truly entertain other

options. In this sense, a behavior is genuinely chosen when other options were—or could have been—entertained (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Under coercion, an individual will probably experience a low sense of choice. Manipulation, a practice that distorts the way we see our options (Raz, 1986) and the way in which we make choices, may also be devastating for autonomy. The same may be said if behavior is only partially internalized and spurred by introjects—in introjected regulation. We must keep in mind that people do not author their lives by having adequate options, but rather by making specific choices (Kalliris, 2015). Activities that are the product of coercion, manipulation, or even those that are regulated through introjection (therefore, with no apparent environmental intervention) will be perceived as controlling events and the individual will feel compelled to act in a certain way. In that case, the presence of options, as many or diverse as they may be, will not provoke a high sense of choice. It is not correct to concentrate exclusively on which objective number of options could instigate a high sense of choice since the result is always the product of interaction between the individual and multiple aspects of the environment. The environment alone cannot guarantee a high sense of choice. However, this does not mean that positive interventions are not possible. The focus should be on offering options in a non-controlling way, which should enhance rather than undermine autonomy.

Take, for example, the choice of becoming a surgeon. The option of becoming a surgeon may hold different social meanings, a point that is made by philosophers who appreciate the so-called “social aspect” of choices (Raz, 1986; Wall, 1998). A surgeon is not merely a person who heals others—the same can be said about a shaman or a healer in a pre-modern community. Part of the appeal of this profession stems from factors that are not directly relevant to the option itself,

but rather to the social meanings it has acquired. The reasons that make some people choose a surgeon's career are not limited to the healing itself, but may very well include social status, financial reward, career prospects, research opportunities, community contribution, personal growth potential, and physical health. Self-determination theory shows that attainment of extrinsic goals (money, fame, or image) correlates positively with ill-being, whereas only the attainment of intrinsic goals (personal growth, community involvement, close relationships, or physical health) correlates positively with well-being. Most importantly, the relationship between change in the attainment of intrinsic goals and change in well-being is mediated by the fulfillment of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Niemi, Ryan, & Deci, 2009). As repeatedly found in research within SDT, it is the satisfaction of these needs, and not the attainment of goals per se, that allows the expression of intrinsic tendencies, the integration of aspects of the environment, and the enhancement of well-being. Undoubtedly, offering the option of becoming a surgeon is important. At the same time, the way the option is offered has an impact on the well-being of the person, alongside other factors, such as individual life goals, causality orientations, and capacity for mindfulness (see Ryan, Huta & Deci, 2008). Even though achieving eudaimonic wellness is indeed complicated, it can be argued that the more the option is offered with support for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the greater the chances that the choice made will lead to self-authorship and the good life.

A last, but important, point on the significance of options should be made here. The fact that options have a "social meaning" and that many of them are not only shaped but, in fact, provided by societies and governments does not entail that individuals simply choose among options provided by others. As long as we

adopt an interactive approach in the study of human behavior, we are bound to point out that individuals can also create options for themselves. Therefore, with regard to policy, the state may provide options directly or may indirectly provide the nutrients for the individual to create options. As long as individuals hold intrinsic aspirations, and are mindful and autonomy oriented, they will be able to entertain innovative options in the absence of direct environmental support. Institutions, schools, and laws should aim at helping people pursue their intrinsic tendencies, especially during early developmental stages, so that they will be able to make self-endorsed choices, even when the environment is not supportive enough.

## **5. Law and policy implications**

It is, by now, evident that self-determination theory views behavior as the result of the interaction between person and environment. It is difficult to define the exact prerequisites of self-authorship without taking into account all relevant factors. Law and policy interventions can only shape a small part of the environment and cannot therefore guarantee self-authorship for the citizens. However, state interventions should at least be aimed in the right direction. Whatever supports the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is a probable facilitator of both intrinsic motivation and processes of internalization—in the end, of well-being and the good life.

The statement that the law can facilitate the conditions for autonomous living and the satisfaction of needs like competence and relatedness is not uncontroversial. As already mentioned, there is a long and influential liberal tradition that seeks to describe the limits of the law—especially criminal law—in terms of several variations of the Millian harm principle. Within this tradition, liberal perfectionists are especially concerned with self-authorship as a fundamentally valuable exercise and a necessary component of well-being. However, law is more often than not seen as a threat to autonomy. Many liberal neutralists, while appreciating the value of self-authorship, are opposed to the (even non-coercive) promotion of any comprehensive account of well-being by the state. Interestingly, even neutralism is currently under attack by theorists who believe that since consensus on values and lifestyles is an unrealistic approach, and reasonable people continue to disagree on the most fundamental issues, all we can hope for is not political neutrality, but rather a *modus vivendi* (Gray, 2000). Of course, there is no guarantee that this “second best,” which will simply aspire to maintain peace and security (Horton, 2010), will have plenty

of room for autonomy or look anything like modern liberal communities. Modus vivendi theories fuel a growing concern among those who believe that the good life differs from person to person that our political institutions (including the law, as one of the most far-reaching) are instruments of oppression rather than supportive of self-authorship.

Clearly, a comprehensive account of liberalism based on self-authorship (in other words, “liberal perfectionism”) is not committed to political neutrality. If autonomy is valuable, either intrinsically or as a component of the good life (or both), it makes sense for the liberal state to protect and promote it. Regardless of one’s understanding of autonomy, there are certain criteria that must be set to any autonomy-promoting state intervention. Firstly, it cannot be self-defeating: if the intervention is likely to result in less autonomy or well-being for those who are subject to it, it is not justified. Secondly, it must take into account the principle of equal concern for persons, allocating resources in a manner that does not consistently favor particular social groups. Inequality, especially with regard to access to opportunities rather than access to outcomes, can consistently undermine basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When these two conditions are met (conditions which are, of course, susceptible to abuse), a liberal perfectionist state can implement policies and pass legislation that support the ideal and exercise of autonomy and self-authorship.

Interventions on the basis of an SDT view of self-authorship should be clearly distinguished from the usual “liberal” policy prescriptions. On the one hand, liberals who advocate political neutrality toward various conceptions of the good life would be unable to support policies that clearly favor self-authorship, even in its revised form defended here. All the state can do under conditions of liberal neutrality is commit to a thick account of self-respect and allow people to pursue

their idea of a good life (Rawls, 2001). On the other hand, those who subscribe to a comprehensive account of autonomy as self-authorship (the so-called liberal perfectionists) speak, as we have seen, of rationality and a good understanding of the world as conditions of autonomy (and good living) but concede that what they defend is a particular way of life. An SDT-based policy intervention would not favor a particular way of life nor would it simply leave room for people to engage in their life path with no support: its purpose would be to offer the proper nutrients for people to grow and follow their intrinsic tendencies.

At the same time, general pro-autonomy measures are conceptually elusive: for example, what are the principles of pro-autonomy education and what should the curriculum of an autonomy-supporting school look like? Those who make more focused policy recommendations (like a comprehensive education that promotes autonomy) are quick to concede that their proposals may be controversial (Colburn, 2011). Proposals based on the SDT-inspired account provided here are limited neither by a commitment to state neutrality nor by a commitment to any particular way of life. For example, SDT would not necessarily favor a particular type of school reform but would stress how it should be implemented: ideally, in a way representing the values and the ideas of the people involved, focusing on internalization, and on basic need satisfaction of school personnel (Assor, Kaplan, Feinberg, & Tal, 2009). This type of comprehensive reform has been successfully tested in Israel by Feinberg, Assor, Kaplan and Kanat-Maymon (2006). If there is not enough time or resources for such a comprehensive reform, there are SDT-based structural reforms such as “First Things First,” developed by James P. Connell and associates that emphasize small learning communities, a family and student advocate system, and instructional improvement (see Deci, 2009 for a

description). In any case, the focus is on *procedures* that allow basic need satisfaction and endorsement of resultant policies.

Similarly, SDT can help choose among different policy suggestions and clarify the role legal provisions are expected to play in an autonomy-supporting culture. The law is the instrument by which states resolve conflicts, maintain the peace, and promote goodness. An SDT-based account of self-authorship can provide a clear guide for policies that commonly fuel heated debates and social conflict. For example, there are clearly defined groups in otherwise autonomy-oriented societies that regard freedom as detrimental or even hostile to their members' well-being. This is true for various religious groups, as evidenced by *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), a famous US Supreme Court case that examined the right of the Amish not to attend school after a certain age. These groups are confident that their ways of life are valuable and view any freedom-promoting intervention as an expression of inadequate respect for their choices and, in fact, equal standing in their society. Self-determination theory passes no judgment on these ways of life per se. However, the evidence in favor of basic need support in education is overwhelming and the state should ensure that all citizens enjoy the opportunity to develop the properties that can help them satisfy their needs and lead good lives. This does not mean that options can be imposed, but merely that they can only be offered to the citizens. Otherwise, they will be perceived as controlling and are less likely to be self-endorsed. The life children choose after their initial need-supportive training is no business of the state, even if it is a life with very little freedom. Even such a life can be self-endorsed and self-authored.

Similar conflicts arise when people's opinions on what an autonomy-respecting government should do in a particular area of public policy are incompatible. School curriculum, subsidies, government campaigning, and the

allocation of resources and infrastructure are some of these areas. Should our children be taught about evolution, creationism, or both? Should the church (any church) be funded by the state? Should we subsidize art instead of more popular forms of entertainment? Is bombarding people with messages about the benefits of sports, education, and healthy eating justified? There is little chance of agreeing on any of these issues without a solid understanding of what promotes self-authorship and how. Every policy that undermines autonomy, competence, and relatedness is a *prima facie* bad idea. Any policy that does not allow citizens a sense of initiative, volition, and ownership, any policy that is not perceived as a reflection of their ideas and values, that seems extremely difficult for them to implement, or that undermines their web of meaningful relationships is bound to fail. Of course, autonomy and well-being are not the only legitimate considerations of any government. But if a policy is autonomy-restricting and harmful for personal well-being, a special justification is required. So, SDT proposes a shift of focus: instead of discussing conflicting values and ways of life with very little chance of ever reaching consensus, the state ought to resolve these conflicts by reference to their effects on basic need support. Relative to this discussion is the SDT-informed understanding of theories of well-being with a strong focus on autonomy, such as the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 2009), which has already been found to contribute to well-being through basic need satisfaction (DeHaan, Hirai, & Ryan, 2016).

Promoting the intrinsic tendencies of the individual may sound like placing too much faith in the individual. The image of the perfectly rational human being is increasingly under fire, especially in light of the work of many behavioral scientists who have convincingly shown that human decision-making is undermined by biases and heuristics (Ariely, 2009; Kahneman, 2012; Thaler, 2015). Were it not for

the coercive threat of a fine or another sanction, many of us would drive without fastening our seatbelts or wearing helmets, enter a worksite without protective gear, buy and use dangerous substances, and so on. These may be actions that, if reflected upon, would not often be endorsed by individuals and would therefore be considered heteronomous (Ryan & Deci, 2006). In all these cases, the role of the law becomes particularly important since public policy and welfare (and, quite often, paternalistic) measures are normally implemented through legislation. The main point in these discussions is *freedom*: coercion restricts freedom and, therefore, we should either justify the coercive interference with reasons that override our commitment to freedom or introduce alternative measures. Libertarian paternalism emerged as a middle-ground answer to this conflict, offering an allegedly freedom-compatible way of making people behave in accordance with their own interests (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Self-determination theory conversely suggests that the appropriate central question in this debate is “how is autonomy affected?” If a policy undermines, by exploiting our biases, our ability to make decisions for ourselves and internalize our options, it is a *prima facie* bad policy, even if our freedom (e.g., our freedom of choice) does not visibly suffer.

## **6. A note on paternalism and perfectionism**

The preceding analysis suggests that we should reconsider the role of law in the protection and promotion of personal well-being. Legal paternalism has traditionally been understood as a conflict between well-being and freedom. This is mainly due to its coercive approach, which normally takes the form of a threat: “If you do not do X, which is good for you, you will suffer Y, which is something unpleasant that would not otherwise occur.” This has led many theorists to the conclusion that it must be freedom that suffers from paternalistic interventions. Arguments in support of this view rely on several descriptions of freedom, including “liberty of action” (Dworkin, 1979), freedom as the non-restriction of options (Kleinig, 1983), and freedom as the unobstructed exercise of decision-making (Clarke, 2002). The SDT account of self-authorship sheds some light on what is wrong with both paternalism itself and the efforts to explain it in terms of a restriction of freedom. Paternalism is problematic because it undermines self-authorship and can, especially when it is coercive, thwart our needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

Moreover, contrary to the teachings of libertarian paternalism, taking coercion out of the picture is not enough because it is self-authorship and not freedom or liberty of action or the non-restriction of options (i.e., “free choice”) that is at stake when the paternalist intervenes. These points do a lot of work in the direction of explaining why people resent paternalistic interventions that target their religion, political activity, or personal life. On the contrary, in some cases of welfare paternalism (i.e., paternalism that seeks to protect us from physical injury or extreme risk), we may discover that individuals endorse the goals of the paternalistic law and this explains why the reactions against these laws are rare.

Self-authorship, then, does not exclude a priori any kind of paternalism: a mild intervention that does not affect more options than the one it explicitly targets and contributes to the exercise of a behavior that is or is very likely to be endorsed by the individual can be compatible with self-authorship, especially when it incorporates an informative/learning element that makes future interventions less likely. After all, it is not complete lack of external influence but the assent to that influence that is the basic criterion for an SDT account of autonomous behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2006).

Self-determination theory supports a perfectionist scheme of political action in the sense that it has a view of what constitutes a good life and offers arguments for state policies in the service of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. In rejecting political neutrality and acknowledging the importance of respect for value pluralism, our analysis shares some characteristics with liberal perfectionism. According to an SDT-based self-authorship theory, there is a lot to be said and to be implemented in the area of the non-coercive promotion of the good life. Education, state campaigning, and subsidies are some of the ways in which the state can help individuals in their effort to satisfy their needs and live well. However, our analysis goes well beyond liberal perfectionism in suggesting that ruling out coercion is not enough for securing autonomy. Many non-coercive measures, including manipulative messages, rewards, and the usurpation of people's decision-making by exploiting their biases, can be equally threatening to autonomy and self-authorship.

In the end, the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness can provide a guide for understanding self-authorship and the ways in which government can constructively support it. As long as it is accepted that psychological experiences are the regnant causes of well-being (Deci & Ryan,

2011), the proper level of analysis is the one adopted in this paper. At the same time, it should be stressed that self-determination theory is still a work in progress and the implementation in the areas of law and public policy will require both empirical research as well as theoretical advancement. Psychology has not been widely accepted and used as a tool for general policy-making but, in the future, self-determination theory can provide a solid basis for understanding self-authorship and devising appropriate policy prescriptions.

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