

Editors' Introduction:
The Challenges of Autonomy and Autonomy as a
Challenge. Thinking Autonomy in Challenging Times

Paolo Furia (University of Turin)
Maria Cristina Clorinda Vendra
(Jan Evangelista Purkyně University, Ústí nad Labem)
Dagmar Kusá (Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts)

What Autonomy? A Prismatic Concept

The aim of the present book is to discuss the concept of autonomy as one of the most pressing issues of our times. This volume finds its roots in the joint conferences “Paul Ricœur and the Challenges of Autonomy” and “The End of Autonomy?”, held at the Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA) in November 2022. It contains original contributions selected from a large number of papers presented by international participants, who animated interdisciplinary work sessions and intense conversations. The sections of the following introduction aim at giving a general theoretical and practical conceptual framework to the chapters that compose this oeuvre. This introduction will serve, then, as a background to the various analyses on the topic of autonomy proposed by the authors contributing to this book. Although this work restricts itself mainly to a philosophical focus on autonomy with reference to different perspectives arising from Paul Ricœur’s approach to this topic, it benefits from an ongoing dialogue with the human and social sciences. It includes, then, not only chapters discussing the Ricœurian understanding of autonomy and its dynamic applications, but also contributions related to other research fields, i.e., political philosophy, environmental philosophy, aesthetics, social sciences and digital studies. In considering the issue of autonomy as touching individual, social, political, cultural, environmental, technological, and economic matters, the fruitful encounter between Ricœurian and Liberal Herald scholars offers the opportunity to critically rethink the notion of autonomy in today’s context in which this concept seems to be stuck between the danger of its decline and the power of its exaltation.



Michal Kern: Vymedzovanie priestoru 1986

Introduction

To use a metaphor, autonomy can be conceived as a prismatic notion. For those who are not acquainted with physics, a prism is an object made up of transparent material, which can disperse beams of white light into its component colors (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet). As long as autonomy cannot be unequivocally defined, it is a prismatic concept whose meanings can be refracted into many different contexts. These meanings can not only be projected but they can also be diffracted into various directions when they meet obstacles. Autonomy's projection, refraction, and diffraction include the extremes of freedom and necessity, identity and alterity, situatedness and displacement, liberty and opposition. Nevertheless, autonomy cannot always and easily be refracted. Consequently, once autonomy loses the possibility of its own refraction, its meanings remain con-fused. With a play on words, autonomy as a prism runs the risk of being transformed into a crystal prison.

The notion of "autonomy" comes from the ancient Greek word *αὐτόνομος*, which literally means "one who gives oneself his or her own law." According to the definition given by the *Cambridge Dictionary*, autonomy is: "1. The right of an organization, country, or region to be independent and govern itself; 2. The ability to make your own decisions without being controlled by anyone else" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Although the etymology of the term and its definition might seem to be clear, autonomy is a polysemic and often contested concept. Involved as an essential dimension of our personal life and embedded in wider social, cultural, political, economic, and financial systems, autonomy deals both with one's own power to act and the instituted power structures (i.e., institutions, laws, policies, governing bodies). The ideal of autonomy has always been connected to a wide range of struggles related to individual and collective interests. Generally speaking, autonomy is involved in controversies dealing with morality and governance, namely with ethical, social and political issues concerning the personal and the societal sphere of our existence. The notion of autonomy seems, then, to be inseparable from that of challenge. More precisely, it appears to be too narrow to discuss the *challenges of autonomy* without recognizing *autonomy as a challenge* in itself. On the one hand, one has to consider the plurality of the challenges of autonomy within individual and social contexts: autonomy has had to confront a variety of challenges throughout the centuries. From this broad historical perspective, we can observe that the genesis and the development of autonomy relate to the evolving challenges corresponding to the different concerns that characterize each historical epoch (Schneewind, 1988). Autonomy is, then, associated with the challenges related to the self-realization of individuals and the independence of a designated group, such as regions, nations, cultural and religious collectivities. On the other hand, autonomy cannot be understood as something that, once achieved, can be unquestionably preserved once and for all. Therefore, there

are not only many challenges of autonomy, but autonomy is in itself a complex challenge. Rather than being a static achievement, autonomy demands the constant movement of a critical evaluation and reevaluation. As a notion marked by motion, autonomy as a challenge is not a label ready to be applied to individuals and groups, but an ideal that needs to be defended from all possible dangers and menaces. Autonomy, therefore, can be considered as a challenge embedded in time and space. As far as time is concerned, autonomy may be viewed as a goal to be achieved in the lifetime of an individual, or through the transformation of collective organisms. But the project of autonomy also has to do with space: at stake is the possibility for a living organism (both individual and collective) to affirm itself in a symbiotic relationship with a proper space, endowed with enough resources to meet its vital exigencies. It is no coincidence that invasion, understood in concrete terms as the movement of progressive occupation of the other's place by an invader, is one of the figures that are contrary to autonomy. Invasion is a spatial process involving collective actors, but it can be used metaphorically to refer to situations in which an individual's intimate space is haunted by the more or less explicit influence of another. In this sense, autonomy may be the result of a conflictual process in which the asymmetries of the social bond must be identified and faced.

Although the concept of autonomy is associated with modern Western thought, particularly with the work of Immanuel Kant, it would be impossible to understand the very meaning of this notion if seen exclusively as a modern invention. To phrase it differently, autonomy is not something that magically appeared in the modern world out of nowhere, like a rabbit out of a hat. Without any pretension to being exhaustive, let us sketch out the principal stages of the development of the notion of autonomy in the history of Western thought. The term autonomy was originally used by the ancient Greeks to define the characteristic of the city-state, that is of the polis (πόλις), as a self-governed dimension in which the community of citizens (δημος) discussed and instituted the body of laws (νόμος) or rules. Conceived as the autonomous community of citizens, the Greek polis is the context in which the political form of society called democracy, literally translated as the power (κράτος) of the people (δημος), achieved its highest early development. Therefore, autonomy was considered in the context of the autonomous collective decision of citizens, that is, as a predicate of the political form of the city-state as a collective entity. Although this collective connotation of the word autonomy is at the core of ancient Greek history, in the works of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, we can find the roots of a more self-centered conception of autonomy. More precisely, autonomy is conceived not only as the essence of the polis, but also in terms of self-direction and self-control, namely as "the actualization of the soul according to reason or involving reason" (Aristotle, 2009, pp. 1098 a7–8). During the

Middle Ages, the recovery and the translation into Latin of Aristotle's writings led medieval philosophers to deepen and extend the analysis of the communitarian aspect of autonomy. Nevertheless, it would be too simplistic to conclude that there was, in the Middle Ages, any consistent development of the notion of autonomy; it would, even, be wrong to maintain that medieval thinkers gave an exclusively communitarian and anti-individualistic orientation to the term. Through the image of the "two suns," i.e., the Papacy and the Empire, as having divine, autonomous origins and coequal autonomous powers, for instance (Alighieri, 2003, pp. 12–22), Dante's political thinking presented significant elements for the idea of pragmatic autonomy (Cacciari, 2022). Medieval writers, however, did not limit their interest in the notion of autonomy to the political and legal spheres. On the contrary, they commonly recognize autonomy as the self-government of all human beings that live their life not just according to reason, but also in accordance with the sovereignty of God's will. Many medieval thinkers, such as Moses Maimonides, John of Paris, Marsilius of Padua, and William of Ockham, contributed to the understanding of individual autonomy, developing this idea on the basis of the medieval political worldview (Nederman, 2010, pp. 551–64). Against the eminence of the clergy and the morality determined by the Church as key references for the medieval period, the Renaissance shaped the framework from a renewed notion of the individual self and consequently of autonomy. Figures such as Berthold of Moosburg, Nicholas of Cusa, Marsilio Ficino, and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, moved in the direction of the development of the autonomy of the empirical subject with respect to nature, and to religious and political orders. The Renaissance epoch contains in germinal form the seeds of the modern conception of the human being as a subject existing as an individual with an independent personality, and consequently for the modern approach to autonomy. As noted by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, "If Protestantism represents the final heightening of the idea of individuality within terms of the Christian religion, the Renaissance is the real cradle of that very antichristian concept and reality: the autonomous individual" (Niebuhr, 1941, p. 61). However, in the context of the Renaissance, the autonomy of the self always remains embedded in a cosmo-ontological hierarchy where the human is identified as the mediating term (*copula mundi*) between the purely material and the purely spiritual.¹ It is in the context of European modernity, namely during the Enlightenment and the Age of Revolution, that the idea of autonomy received a renewed contextualization. Specifically, it was with Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism that autonomy was associated for the first time with the power of transcendental reason. More exactly, freedom of will is a property of the human being as a rational being which does not depend

¹ See, for instance Ficino, M. (1482). *Theologia Platonica*. Antonio Miscomini.

on physical laws, but which is a law to itself. Practical reason has to be the universal and necessary law, it has to take the form of an imperative or, as Kant puts it, "I ought never to act except in such a way that I can will that my maxim should become a universal law." Thus, the principle of autonomy is understood as "the sole principle of ethics." Kant's conception of autonomy left an indelible mark on ethical and political debates concerning individual and communal autonomy, liberal democratic states, distributive justice and human rights. Of course, in modern political thought, not every trend or author has subscribed to Kant's radical position; however, autonomy will thereafter become one of the main tenets of ethical and political systems and projects, often brought into dialogue and dialectic with other principles such as the search for happiness and self-realization, empathy, and solicitude towards others. In Romanticism, the emphasis on autonomy against any kind of external dependence has broadened the scope of the idea of autonomy from the strictly moral field to the domains of sensibility, aesthetics, and imagination. On the other hand, it is well known to have also led to solipsism, irony, and nihilism. It is always within a romantic framework that the collective dimension of autonomy has been retrieved and transformed into a claim for national sovereignty against post-Napoleonic restoration. The search for authenticity of the modern self is echoed in much of the European movements for the birth of the modern Nation-States (Taylor, 2018), which had to retrieve and affirm the original character of the nation against baseless, irrational or even foreign authorities and, at the same time, was centered on respect for the inviolable freedoms of the individuals. In the present time, authors like John Rawls, Michael Walzer, and Michael Sandel, as well as critical theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, and Axel Honneth, are well known for their contributions to philosophical thought on the nature and the meaning of individual self-rule. The political, the personal and the moral connotations of the word autonomy call the attention of those philosophers who attempt to discuss autonomy and to broaden its meaning within a variety of research fields, e.g., bioethics, care ethics, philosophy of technology and artificial intelligence (AI), environmental philosophy, etc.

Two considerations can be made at this point. First, we can affirm that there is not just one philosophy of autonomy, but many *philosophies of autonomy*. As this short excursus on Western thought has shown, the philosophical analysis of the concept of autonomy gave rise to different perspectives related to worldviews that vary from one epoch to another. Basically understood as self-government and self-determination, autonomy's meaning is multifarious according to the political, moral, and personal orders in which it is problematized. The fundamental question that arises here is if there is a continuity or rather a discontinuity among the different philosophical approaches to autonomy. In other words, we are invited to think about whether autonomy can be analyzed through a dynamic view that sees in its different

meanings an essential continuity across difference, rather than static separations or oppositions. Second, the notion of autonomy implies a positive and a negative dimension (Kekes, 2011, pp. 192–204). First, autonomy is linked to the quest for the social, political, and cultural independence of a designated group, to the claim of the flourishing of individual life and self-realization as grounded in the recognition of the equality of individual abilities and rights, up to the demand for equal opportunities and fair treatment of all individuals considered as free members of a society. In this sense, autonomy refers to the establishment of the positive conditions that allow for the achievement or the maintenance of self-government and self-determination. Autonomy reveals itself as inseparable from human agency and freedom, but not mixed up with them. Second, autonomy's negative dimension corresponds to its goal to prevent situations that can cause serious personal and moral harm or that can shake the political and social orders. The problem is to understand if the positive and the negative dimensions of autonomy are incompatible or if they complement each other dialectically.

From the claim of the flourishing of individual life and self-realization as grounded in the recognition of the equality of individual abilities and rights, to the demand for equal opportunities and fair treatment of all individuals considered as free members of a society, and to the quest for the social, political and cultural independence of a designated group, autonomy is inseparable from heteronomy. Autonomy is a concrete ideal that is to be accomplished in time and space precisely because, in everyday life and history, social bonds are largely asymmetric. In the asymmetries of the social bonds, there are those who have the power to decide for others in many fields of everyday life. A possible unsettling consequence of the asymmetries of the social bond is that the autonomous selves must impose their law on others in order to be truly able to give law to themselves. It could even be argued that the very project of one's own autonomy includes someone else's heteronomy, whose resources, spaces and workforce are considered necessary in order to grant the autonomy of those occupying the more powerful relational pole. In the Greek polis, the cradle of the concept of autonomy, there were slaves, colonies and subjugated settlements. All this can be seen as an *aporia*, or even a contradiction inherent to autonomy. One possible way to envisage this problem is represented by the Ricœurian perspective according to which the asymmetries of the social bonds may be amended by solicitude, that is, by recognizing the mutually constitutive dependence of the selves. In this framework, the project of autonomy is not in opposition with the recognition of the vulnerability of the self and the other. To a certain extent, everybody is heteronomous and vulnerable, the most powerful included. By recognizing that they depend on others, even the most powerful are faced with the recognition of their inherent vulnerability. In this frame-

work, autonomy is not the solipsistic self-determination of oneself against the other. On the contrary, autonomy can best be achieved together.

Autonomy in the Social and Political Realms

The concept of autonomy is also explored, if with somewhat different foci, in the political science literature, where it became increasingly central as the understanding of democracy and development underwent seismic shifts after the Second World War. In social and political contexts, autonomy is closely intertwined with the concept and fate of liberal democracy, and realizing one is not fully possible without realizing the other.

Membership in a liberal democratic state—citizenship—is the outcome of the centuries-long struggle for human rights. T. H. Marshall, in his classical study *Citizenship and Social Class* (Marshall & Bottomore, 1987), maps the history of citizenship through the assertion of individual categories of human rights as they historically emerged at the forefront of political battles for inclusion, voice, and the right to have a say in decision-making. Though first published in 1950, this rights-based conception of democracy was ahead of its time and foreshadowed the evolution in the thinking about democracy in the decades that followed. In this conception, the story of democratic citizenship is the story of a growing number of people fighting for civil rights (17th, 18th century), political rights (19th century), and social, economic, and cultural rights (20th century). Democratic citizenship is, then, defined largely, if not exclusively, by the catalog of rights (and corresponding duties) which safeguard the quality of life and opportunities of every individual. Unlike other, minimalist definitions of democracy in those times, which tended to limit their focus to elite democratic leadership, fair elections, and plurality of political parties and interest groups competing for power, the spotlight is here on the main recipient and the main end of a democratic state—its citizen and resident. The focus on rights, as an end and as a means for the development of society and its inhabitants, gradually became the dominant understanding of liberal democracy, so much so that the United Nations defines democratic governance as “a set of values and principles that should be followed for greater participation, equality, security and human development. Democracy provides an environment that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, and in which the freely expressed will of people is exercised. People have a say in decisions and can hold decision-makers to account. Women and men have equal rights and all people are free from discrimination” (UN, n.d.), and refers to the code of international human rights treaties and covenants in which those rights are stipulated.

Autonomy is connected with democracy through the liberal conception of human rights, but also through the idea of the collective rights of com-

munities of identity—nations, ethnic groups, language groups, religious groups, and more. Fukuyama ties the two conceptions to the bifurcated development of individual and collective concepts of dignity since the time of the Enlightenment, when the individual and their worth started to be valued (Fukuyama, 2019). In his account, the foundation for dignity is the inner self's craving for recognition. Fukuyama links this to the "third part of the soul," taken from Socrates, which (next to the other two parts—desire and reason) is the seat of judgment, worth, anger, and pride (p. 23) and thus also the seat of identity politics and conflicts. The drive for recognition means that individuals as well as communities wish to be recognized as equal to others. While this part of the soul, Fukuyama asserts, has always been a part of human nature, "the belief that each of us has an inner self that is worthy of respect, and that the surrounding society may be wrong in not recognizing it, is a more recent phenomenon. So while the concept of identity is rooted in *thymos*, it emerged only in modern times when it was combined with a notion of an inner and an outer self, and the radical view that the inner self was more valuable than the outer one. This was the product of both a shift in ideas about the self and the realities of societies that started to evolve rapidly under the pressures of economic and technological change" (Fukuyama, 2019, p. 27). The quest for self-determination followed two paths—one linked to collectivities, especially ethnic groups and nations, requiring the competitive environment of modern (not necessarily democratic) states, and the path toward the realization of individual dignity, requiring a liberal democratic state defined by the notion of individual rights. Liberal and national revolutions simultaneously swept across the Western world, conflicting with and complementing each other at the same time. The increasingly individualized and uprooted societies needed nationalism to form new identity bonds and replace, to some extent, the function of socialization and value order that religion previously fulfilled. The tension between the prioritization of the liberal concept of individual dignity and the conservative notion of collective dignity is still alive and well and, in fact, on the rise, finding expression in identity politics and the so-called "cultural wars" that characterize many political scenes today.

The interconnection between liberal democracy and autonomy has also been explored from an economic perspective. As Western societies stabilized and experienced steady economic growth after the Second World War, a new generation emerged, which was born in peace and existential security. Ronald Inglehart has observed this generation and its difference from older generations through cultural values and has mapped the rise of postmaterialist culture, which arose from growing autonomy in the economic, social, and knowledge realms (Inglehart, 2018). While the Industrial Revolution led to the secularization of values and societies (but also to hierarchical order structures in the quest for the conquest of nature, and respect for author-

ity and conformity), the Post-industrial Revolution resulted in the rise of self-expression values and the self-empowerment of ascending generations. It is an economic argument, as this development is dependent on a steady economic growth and existential security, enabling the reorientation from materialist values focused on survival and order to postmaterialist values focused on self-actualization, rights, and social issues. According to this argument, a steady economic growth leads to the birth of generations that need not worry about day-to-day survival and which take peace as a given. This growing individual economic security and independence is accompanied by an increase in attained education and thus more knowledge-based autonomy—the capability to be more and better informed and to make decisions pertaining to one’s own life, as well as by growing social autonomy—allowing people more mobility, traveling, settling in distant places, meeting new and diverse people. The result, besides an increase in personal autonomy, is a more open, diverse, tolerant, and caring society. The most significant shift towards postmaterial values occurred, not surprisingly, in the most advanced liberal democracies that are also socially redistributive and care about the environment and quality of life.

The liberal and national revolutions are accompanied by decolonial revolutions which combine elements of both movements and, at the same time, add the element of geopolitical and class struggle to redefine economic and political relations in the former colonies. This decolonization literature criticizes the power, class, and race relations between the former colonies and colonial powers (e.g. Césaire, 2000/1955), but also within the newly independent states, transforming existing relations and installing a new political class into the colonial power structure (Fanon, 1952), as well as through distorted legal codes that reflect the colonial legacy and misconceptions of the state (Mamdani, 1996). These relations and tensions, in turn, define and limit individual as well as collective autonomy, the struggle for which still shapes decolonial movements today. However, exploration of autonomy in this context, as well as its critique by feminist and intersectional authors, would warrant separate publications, which will hopefully appear in the near future.

A Decline of Autonomy?

The perspective that connects the scope of personal autonomy with political life leads to the important question of the reversibility of autonomy in relation to changing conditions. It is apparent that autonomy can be fully practiced in favorable institutional, political, social, cultural, and economic contexts. The present era has been dubbed the era of democratic decline. Over the past several years, indexes measuring quality of liberal democracy

have shown a decline in scores of liberal democracies worldwide. Individual freedoms, minority rights, and the rule of law are declining not only in new or less developed democracies, but in the most advanced as well. Decline in democracy is linked with global decline in trust, especially towards political leaders and media, a trend that the Edelman Global Trust Barometer has been observing for the past twenty-two years (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023). There is also a growing gap in trust towards institutions and leaders between national elites and the majority of population. Less than half of citizens in democratic countries trust their institutions. This cycle of mistrust breeds further polarization within countries and serves as a feeding ground for the pandemic of misinformation, disinformation, hoaxes, and conspiracies. Personal autonomy, dependent on information, set in the web of interdependent relationships and institutions, is therefore necessarily impacted by such developments.

Part of the decline and polarization plaguing many societies today is the phenomenon of a “cultural backlash” —a conservative reaction to the postmaterialist developments which, by bringing new rights groups to the forefront, was perceived by many communities enjoying their status at the top of social hierarchies as a threat to their own status and a form of humiliation (Inglehart & Norris, 2019). It is also a result of two major shifts taking place in our times: the shift in the major political cleavages from the left-right cleavages to the conflicts of cultural values, and the technological revolution and the rise of social media that aided the re-tribalization of societies (Fukuyama, 2020, p. 11) and facilitates the politics of identity, challenging of authorities, and the rise in mistrust.

In sum, democracy and autonomy are challenged by the same developments, and their intersections and interdependence in light of their future prospects deserves more academic attention.

Overview of the Book

The essays collected in the first part of this volume extend the scope of Ricœur’s analysis of autonomy through their various interdisciplinary explorations into phenomenology, semantics, aesthetics, literary theory, theology, education, politics, philosophy of technology, environmental philosophy, and theory of justice and memory. These essays share the conviction that autonomy can be said in many ways. For the authors of these essays, Ricœur’s conception of autonomy goes far beyond his own work.

I. Paul Ricœur: Thinker of Autonomy. Interdisciplinary Perspectives

In the first chapter of this section, Jakub Čapek argues that, in Ricœur’s work, the concept of autonomy has both a moral and a personal meaning. Without denying the complex question of moral autonomy, Čapek refers to

Ricœur's early phenomenology of the will (*Freedom and Nature. The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, 1960) and to his mature philosophical hermeneutic anthropology (*Oneself as Another*, 1992), to offer significant insights into the issue of personal autonomy, understood as the capacity to decide and act or refrain from acting. By following Ricœur's line of thought, the chapter carefully presents a critical study of the connection between autonomy and will and between autonomy and interpretation, underscoring the intertwining between the phenomenology and hermeneutics of human agency. Čapek finally turns to the problem of autonomy in current media contexts, providing a highly illuminative approach to the relationship between attention and autonomy.

Johann Michel draws on Ricœur's hermeneutics of the text and shows how it can be extended to images. More precisely, Michel aims at broadening the validity of the processes of autonomization and fixation of the meaning from the intentions of the authors to the aesthetic domain. The attempt to reconcile text and image from a hermeneutical perspective is developed with reference to examples such as Vincent van Gogh's 1889 "Self-portrait with Cut-off Ear and Bandage" and Edgar Degas' 1895 photograph of Renoir and Mallarmé. This framework is not limited to the development of a renewed approach to Ricœur's concept of autonomy. Rather, it also opens up a significant reconsideration of Ricœur's circle of triple mimesis (prefiguration-configuration-refiguration) and an original rethinking of the dialectic between explanation and understanding.

Sophie Vlacos' chapter addresses the issue of autonomy in relation to the concept of critique and its role in the philosophy of Ricœur. She starts from the skepticism towards the idea of critique displayed by contemporary realist and post-critique theories like Meillassoux's. The author argues that Ricœur's understanding and use of Kant's critical philosophy is compatible with the main assumptions of realism as long as, thanks to the critical gaze, it is possible to see reality as autonomous, that is, as non-reducible to the subjective and relativist standpoints of the subjects. At the same time, the authors considered by Vlacos as representatives of post-critique thought, such as Latour and Sedgwick, in opposition to Kant's correlationism, subscribe to conceptions of reality as open, pluralistic, multi-layered, and multi-dimensional, which makes it possible for different subjective points of view to emerge and be confronted in the public space. The author argues that Ricœur's peculiar reappraisal of Kant's critique serves precisely the purpose of defining reality in terms of pluralism and openness, as an "orchestration of appearance and limit": a definition which, by the way, fosters a non-dogmatic interpretation of realism itself.

Monica Gorza's chapter explores the concept of autonomy by proposing a critical analysis of Ricœur's reflections on biblical hermeneutics. Referring specifically to Ricœur's 1966 article "La Parole, instauratrice de liberté," she

focuses on the relationship between the Word of the Bible and autonomy. Considering the Word as a passive background in which human beings are originally inscribed, the chapter proposes to understand autonomy in terms of emancipation and freedom. These reflections lead Gorza to turn to a hermeneutic approach to the concept of listening grounded in Ricœur's comments on the Sermon on the Mount. In this biblical narrative, the hermeneutic motif of listening takes the place of the concept of "cura," a Latin word meaning to care and to worry. Through a philosophical rereading of the Word, Ricœur's reflection finally highlights the ethical value of listening. Listening goes hand in hand with the intelligence of autonomy and the joy of living. The unity of these elements leads to the conclusion that the human word is the only one that is free, emancipated, and wonderful.

In her chapter, Francesca D'Alessandris applies Ricœur's conception of autonomy to school-level education. More precisely, she sets up a dialogue between Ricœur and John Dewey's philosophy of education. The connection between these authors is motivated by their similar approaches to the problem of autonomy. This comparison lies in the framework of the ongoing research about a theoretical connection between hermeneutics and pragmatism. These two philosophical traditions share an interest in the philosophy of action, but also and more importantly a rejection of, on the one hand, any metaphysics, and on the other hand, any relativism and nihilism. Following Ricœur's and Dewey's theoretical and practical perspectives, D'Alessandris shows that autonomy emerges as a fundamental task for a democratic education. In doing so, she proposes a cross-reading of Ricœur's essay "Autonomy and Vulnerability" (1997) and Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916). Moreover, she acknowledges that this task can be pursued by educating to and through narrative, i.e., by supporting learners in being autonomous as a never-ending process of the realization of the self, with others, in democratic institutions.

Paolo Furia's chapter focuses on the concept of political autonomy and draws on different texts and parts of Ricœur's work to show the limits and the possibilities inherent in his approach to the issue. The author proposes three meanings of political autonomy: independence of the self from political power, collective autonomy underpinning the legitimate exercise of political power, and autonomy of the body-politic understood as a full-fledged subject endowed with agency and responsibility. If the first two meanings of political autonomy are clearly present in Ricœur's works, the third owes too much to the organic metaphor of the state as a living entity, a metaphor that seems incompatible with Ricœur's emphasis on personal autonomy and free will. The author argues that Ricœur's conception of institutions, in particular in *Oneself as Another* (1992), paves the way for a phenomenological account of political autonomy that recognizes the dependence of the capable selves on institutions, acknowledges the relative autonomy of the intersubjective

organized in political bodies, and sees institutions as ever-changing forms ultimately dependent on the creative character of subjective experience and the historicity of life.

Guido Gorgoni studies the issues of identity and autonomy within the context of our digital society. The author sees in Ricœur's conception of personal identity a good way, on the one hand, to understand the narrative and fragile constitution of the self in the digital era, and, on the other hand, to counter the risks implicit in the collapse of the self to a sum of data shaped by algorithms and dependent on the structures of digital and social media. According to the author, the idea of digital citizenship elaborated by authors like Isin and Ruppert (2020) blends well with the Ricœurian theory of the self as the subject of rights and capabilities, as elaborated in *Oneself as Another* (1990) and *The Course of Recognition* (2007). This entails a conception of digital space as a conflictual dimension where the self is exposed to various forms of influences and even abuses, but still can fight, also collectively, to turn into a digital citizen, aware of her possibilities and limits.

In her chapter, Maria Cristina Clorinda Vendra explores autonomy from the standpoint of the intersection between phenomenology of the embodiment and philosophy of the environment. More precisely, she aims at extending Ricœur's early phenomenological work to argue for a form of "ecological autonomy." The chapter presents a vital reconsideration of the concept of autonomy within contemporary emphases on the human being's challenging relation to the natural environment. In considering autonomy as related to the complex issues of body adaptation and movement, Vendra seeks to rethink the meaning of autonomy by insisting on human beings' situatedness within the natural environment. Who or what is, then, autonomous when we speak about "ecological autonomy"? Without denying the problem of the autonomy of the natural environment itself, Vendra points out that ecological autonomy can be understood through the relationship between the human organism, as a constitutive part of the human being, and the natural environment in terms of what she calls a "dependent independence."

The final chapter in this section brings us to the topic of the autonomy and possibility of justice through the concept of a *capable subject*, explored in Ricœur's description of juridical justice (Ricœur, 2000). Relying on case studies of subjects of law that cannot be described as *capable*, the chapter examines the limits of justice in relation to autonomy. These subjects are either minorities, like the Roma minority in Slovakia, who are incapacitated in this sense by systemic discrimination and by their marginalization and resulting voicelessness, or they may be subjects incapacitated by temporal passing, like the victims of the totalitarian Communist regime. The chapter then ponders whether *memory work* can achieve or simulate justice on behalf of those who cannot stake their own claim on the grounds of the institutions

of justice. The chapter is a segway to the next part of our book, which seeks to enrich the discussion on autonomy through its empirical application.

II. The End of Autonomy? Challenges to Autonomy in Social and Political Contexts

Ricœur was a philosopher deeply concerned with and inspired by the events unfolding in the present and historical time around him. His main hero, the capable human being, is situated in the social and political world and its institutions, the main purpose of which is the “good life.” Therefore, in the second part of the book, we cross the boundaries of Ricœurian studies and explore autonomy through the lens of other approaches, such as Hegel’s philosophy of nature, phenomenology, moral development theories, the capability approach, existential philosophy, and geopolitics. This spectrum of applications of autonomy to various social, historical, and political contexts will hopefully broaden the horizons and open avenues for future research, whether in relation to the work of Paul Ricœur or around the concept of autonomy in general.

The first chapter in this section, “Self-Determining Animals: Human Nature and Relational Autonomy in Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature,” by León Antonio Heim, considers the concept of autonomy in light of current critiques of the concept by naturalist and feminist philosophy and turns to Hegel for inspiration, finding that his understanding of autonomy has withstood the test of time and is of relevance in the current discussions on autonomy and its shifts.

Moved by the contemporary assaults on the institutions and values of liberal democracy, Andrzej Gniazdowski brings us back to the interwar period to consider the phenomenological critique of the solidarist and Fascist concept of the corporate state developed within phenomenological thought, primarily in the writings of Othmar Spann, which deny or subordinate personal autonomy to the community or state. The chapter “Corporate State and Personal Autonomy: A Phenomenological Approach” presents arguments against this conception of a corporate state; it also stands as an important critique of current Catholic thought and as a warning against developments towards authoritarian corporatism in countries such as Russia.

Lukáš Siegel’s chapter draws attention to the consideration of autonomy in the day-to-day life of a diverse democratic society. His chapter on “Everyday Autonomy: Applying the Capability Approach to the Case of People with Disabilities” introduces the capability approach, which closely resonates with Ricœur’s own perception of the capable subject in relation to society and vice versa. The author argues that autonomy, as the agency over one’s life and freedom to decide and act on one’s destiny, is best understood when applied to a day-to-day context and tested on situations pertaining to people whose capacities to act or think are limited by disabilities. The capability approach, grounded on the notion of a good life as life in dignity,

emphasizes the autonomy of any and all individuals. The purpose of the state, then, is to facilitate such a life for all, including for those with severe handicaps.

In a similar vein, though with a different conclusion, Dila Özenç explores the concept of autonomy in relation to people with psychopathy. Her chapter, “Free Will from the Viewpoint of Moral Development,” studies the stages of moral development in children as described in development theories, and the link between empathy, conformity, and free will in the individual stages. The author hypothesizes that psychopathic individuals may be more able to practice autonomy as their empathic skills, essential for conformity to social rules and norms, are less developed. However, in light of these theories, it appears that people with neurodevelopmental disorders are not able to undergo all six stages of moral development and thus not able to reach the final stage in which personal autonomy fully forms.

The next chapter brings us to a consideration of the topic of autonomy in light of another limitation experienced by many in recent years. The global Covid-19 pandemic, whose reverberations can still be felt, has curbed the freedoms of millions around the world as they have had to endure lockdowns, undergo vaccinations, wear masks in public, etc. In the chapter “Absurd Rebellion Against Covid,” Dominik Kulcsár explores the notions of freedom and autonomy during this trying time from the perspective of existential philosophy. Many also rebelled against these measures, a rebellion against “the absurd” that the human mind struggles to grasp. The feeling of absurdity was awakened by the disruption of routine and a harsh reminder of our mortality. The rebellion against the Covid-19 measures took place in the name of freedom, but often with deadly consequences for the rebels and others. Such freedom is mistaken, as its pursuit harms others. A true rebellion takes place in the name of shared values and goals; actions against the Covid-19 measures show a lack of solidarity with others, and therefore fail to be a true rebellion.

In his chapter, “Inside the Submarine: Europe’s Dreams of Autonomy and Global Perspectives,” Adam Bence Balázs considers the geopolitical dimensions of autonomy in present-day Europe, in a world in flux after the breakdown of the bipolar Cold War world. The urgency of recent global crises and the shock of a conventional war on European soil in Ukraine cast a spotlight on European delusions of grandeur, and urge the reconsideration of Eurocentric understandings of autonomy, which the author likens to Jules Verne’s submarine *Nautilus*. Europe’s struggle to maintain its status in the changing power structure of the world reminds us of the illusory and fragile nature of autonomy and its place in the web of interdependence.

This book helps us to cross some of the complex and risky routes of autonomy as a challenge, while shedding light on the challenges of autonomy. It serves, then, as a lantern providing some brightness to explore the spaces of autonomy. Enriched and deepened by interdisciplinary conversations, our understanding of autonomy will be opened to new issues and paths of inquiry. Therefore, we strongly believe that it would be misleading for this volume to draw a conclusion, if with this word we intend its customary signification of closure and a fixed end. Rather, we should acknowledge that it seems appropriate to complete our work with the sigh of the Ricœurian incompleteness (*inachèvement*). This is not an incapacity, but a productive paradox, enabling us to look consciously at the depth and the breadth of a reflection on the notion of autonomy that cannot be universally exhaustive.

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