

Autonomy and the Demands of Love

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Abstract

J. David Velleman has argued that what it makes sense to care about out of love for someone is the unimpeded realisation of her autonomy. Although Velleman refers to both Kantian and perfectionist notions of autonomy, a close look at his argument shows that the form of autonomy that he employs actually amounts instead to personal autonomy. I argue that there are in fact no value constraints on the objects of autonomous choice on this account of autonomy. The upshot of this claim is that a person may exercise personal autonomy without satisfying many other important normative demands. This suggests that Velleman's endorsement of the unimpeded realisation of one's beloved's autonomy is wrong, insofar as a beloved's autonomous choice may, in securing her personal interests, thwart her achievement of important goods, especially moral goods. In such cases, we have reason to hinder the unimpeded realisation of our beloved's autonomy, precisely out of love for her.

Keywords: autonomy, love, Velleman, Kant, Aristotle, perfectionism, prudential value

Introduction

What is it to love someone, and what should my love lead me to want for those that I love? In “Beyond Price”, J. David Velleman (2008) has answered both of these questions by referencing the central place of rational autonomy in love. Love, according to Velleman, is an appreciative response to the value of a person’s rational autonomy. Velleman gives autonomy pride of place because, in his view, being autonomous is “essential to – perhaps definitive of – being a person” (Velleman 2006, 16-44, 43). In loving someone, we are phenomenologically seized by a “vivid awareness of [another’s] personhood, consisting in [his] rational autonomy” (Velleman 2008, 204); we view that person as “a self-aware autonomous other – a person who is a self to himself, like us” (Velleman 2008, 199). Unlike respect, however, which “arrests our self-interested designs on a person”, love “arrests our emotional defences against him, leaving us emotionally vulnerable to him” (Velleman 2008, 201). Furthermore, by “disarming our emotional defences”, love makes us susceptible to caring about “the unimpeded realisation of [the beloved’s] personhood” (Velleman 2008, 205). Specifically, loving someone means wanting him to realise his autonomy fully, because that is what his good consists in:

Things are worth caring about [in a sustained way] because desires so sustained give structure and unity to [one’s] life, thereby providing scope for the fullest realisation of [one’s] autonomy. And the fullest realisation of [the beloved’s] autonomy is what it would make sense to care about out of love for the person (Velleman 2008, 210).

In response to Velleman, Jeanette Kennett (2008) has argued that although Velleman is “exactly right” to hold that out of love for others we should want the full flourishing of their autonomy, he is wrong to hold that the arresting awareness of the beloved’s value only involves recognition of the beloved’s rational autonomy: “Other capacities and qualities, which may precede or outlast and sometimes even undermine our rational will, may be part of the true and proper self of a person” (Kennett 2008, 214). According to Kennett, then, although “it does make sense for us to want the realisation of the beloved’s autonomy for his own sake...autonomy may more often be that which we want for the beloved, rather than the value to which we already respond in the beloved” (Kennett 2008, 214). For Kennett, the value of persons primarily resides not in their possession of rational autonomy, but rather in their capacity to value; and she denies that all cases of valuing can be reduced to acts of autonomous willing.

I think that Kennett is quite right to challenge the primacy of rational autonomy in Velleman’s account of what we respond to when we love someone, but I think that her critique should be extended further. In the present paper I argue that Velleman is wrong to hold that love demands promoting the unimpeded realisation of the autonomy of the person one loves. A clearer understanding of what autonomy as understood by Velleman actually amounts to shows that although the full realisation of one’s autonomy may be good for one in a prudential sense (in terms of making her life more satisfying for her)¹, the flourishing of autonomy may lead to other important types of goodness not being so served; and when this is the case, we have

¹ In the present paper I understand prudential value (roughly) as the value that is present when a person’s life is going well for her in the sense of being satisfying for her to experience. It should be noted, however, that other (less subjective) conceptions of prudential value have been defended. I will not enter into that debate here. For an excellent discussion of the variety of conceptions of prudential value, see Daniel Haybron (2008).

reason to disregard or even hinder the full flowering of our beloved's autonomy, precisely out of love.²

Velleman on Autonomy

The core meaning of autonomy is 'self-government' or 'self-determination', but this general concept has given rise to several different conceptions of autonomy which are at odds with each other in various ways. Hence, when one speaks about 'autonomy', it is pivotal to clarify the kind of autonomy that one has in mind. In the present section I reconstruct Velleman's discussion in an attempt to provide just this kind of clarification. I then go on to argue that the conception of autonomy that Velleman seems to be using creates problems for his claims regarding the demands of love in relation to autonomy support.

Curiously, Velleman goes into little detail when it comes to explicating what he understands by 'rational autonomy,' and when he does explicate his understanding of the concept, he seems to give mixed and even inconsistent accounts. I believe that Velleman eventually endorses a notion of autonomy that functionally amounts of personal autonomy, but showing this requires some unpacking.

Velleman first mentions rational autonomy in association with Kant's understanding of the relation between rational autonomy and respect. Paraphrasing Kant, Velleman writes that to act autonomously "we must act under the guidance of reasons", which involves regarding someone "as having the moral law within him" (Velleman 2008, 202). At this point Velleman's understanding of autonomy seems to parallel Kant's: to be autonomous is to act under the guidance of reasons in conformity with the moral law.

Velleman's next reference to autonomy, however, moves in the direction of a perfectionistic account of autonomy as a key component in one's flourishing. After first adopting and adapting Stephen Darwall's (2004) theory of welfare as rational care by arguing that love, rather than sympathetic concern, is the more fitting form of concern in relation to which a person's interests should be defined, and then endorsing Connie Rosati's (2006) suggestion "that what it makes sense to care about out of love for a person is the preservation of the value or the valuable condition to which love is an appreciative response" (Velleman 2008, 197). Velleman writes:

My conception of love, when combined with the views of Darwall and Rosati, favors an Aristotelian conception of a person's interests. What it makes sense to care about out of love for a person is the unimpeded realisation of his personhood, which might be described as his flourishing, in that sense of the term which is used to translate Aristotle's *eudaimonia* (Velleman 2008, 205).

Velleman goes on to draw a strong relation between the exercise of one's autonomy and "the unimpeded realisation of his personhood". This characterisation of autonomy sits uneasily with the earlier Kantian conception, however. Here developing one's autonomy is being described as a crucial part of a person's interests, as a core part of a person's flourishing. Although it may be possible to wed this view with the Kantian view of autonomy, it is not

² Although I draw upon intuitions that I would consider relatively unproblematic regarding love and its demands in what follows, providing a fully developed theory of the same is outside the bounds of the present paper. My purposes in this essay are primarily critical.

obvious that this is appropriate. Talk of ‘interests’ and ‘flourishing’ suggests a connection between autonomy and self-interest that Kant wished to deny, at least in the sense that Kant saw us as under a rational obligation to subsume the desire for happiness – our own, or that of others – to the demands of morality when these come into conflict. True, Aristotle’s notion of the *eudaimon* is a normative notion that incorporates certain ethical constraints on character, but what is served by the exercise of autonomy within a eudaimonistic framework is not fealty to morality, but the well-being or happiness of the agent.

Velleman goes on to flesh out his understanding of supporting the autonomy – that is, the “unimpeded realisation of personhood” – of those one loves by discussing his coming to care for his adolescent sons’ interests: lacrosse, Morris dancing, poetry slams and photography. Velleman notes that he came to find himself caring about his sons’ progress in these pursuits, “no matter how little intrinsic value I might have been inclined to see there in advance”, because they were signs of his sons’ coming into “full realisation of their autonomy” (Velleman, 2008, 205). Doubtless Velleman’s interest in his sons’ burgeoning autonomy is praiseworthy, yet here it can be seen that the connection with Kantian autonomy seems to have been rendered even more tenuous. Not only are his sons’ autonomous choices disassociated from explicit connection to the moral law – they seem to have been motivated rather by inclination and a desire for private happiness – but they are also admitted by Velleman to have potentially little intrinsic value in his eyes, which would be impossible if Velleman accepted the Kantian understanding of the nature of autonomous choice.

It may be objected that Kant established imperfect duties to self and duties to others within his moral philosophy, and that incorporating these notions provides Velleman with the resources to retain an association between his understanding of autonomy and Kant’s. Imperfect duties to self include an imperfect duty to cultivate one’s natural powers.³ Duties to others include the duty to make others’ ends one’s own, at least to some extent.⁴ In one sense these reminders are very helpful: we can certainly make sense of how Kant could hold that an autonomous (moral) agent could be virtuous when seeking her own perfection, or could be virtuous when concerned with helping others’ attain their ends. In a more important sense, however, these reminders are beside the point. I am not arguing that Kantian autonomy is *incompatible* with self-cultivation or benevolence. My point, rather, is that Kant’s understanding of what it means *to exercise autonomy as such* has nothing to do with satisfying one’s inclinations. Velleman has claimed that love for his sons demands that he seek the full realisation of their autonomy, *the exercise of which consists in* developing and exploring various (and shifting) interests. Yet this is not what the exercise of autonomy consists in for Kant. For Kant, the exercise of autonomy is essentially linked to freedom from inclination and the possibility of adherence to the moral law that that freedom permits. In short, saying that self-actualisation or concern for others’ interests are compatible with Kantian autonomy is a far cry from saying that the exercise of Kantian autonomy consists in these things. My claim is that Velleman’s account of autonomy moves away from Kant to the extent that he claims that autonomy is a matter of exploring interests such as Lacrosse or Morris dancing. Even if the maxims associated with the latter pursuits pass the Categorical Imperative test, this does not mean that engaging in the content of those maxims is the exercise of autonomy. Based on these considerations, it seems that Velleman’s actual interest is not in a Kantian but rather in a perfectionist understanding of autonomy as a core component in human well-being.

³ See Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, MS 6.444 (translated by Mary Gregor)

⁴ See Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, MS 4.423 (translated by Mary Gregor)

Velleman's later appropriation of Harry Frankfurt's (1998) account of caring, however, brings the suspicion that Velleman is actually concerned with the relation between love and support for the flourishing of a still different kind of autonomy, namely *personal* autonomy. Velleman quotes Frankfurt with approval when the latter writes:

Caring is important to us for its own sake, insofar as it is the indispensably foundational activity through which we provide continuity and coherence to our volitional lives. Regardless of whether its objects are appropriate, our caring about things possesses for us an inherent value by virtue of its essential role in making us the distinctive kind of creatures we are (Frankfurt 1998, 162-3).

The point that Velleman makes here is that choosing things to care about is a central aspect of realizing one's autonomy, and is valuable for persons because it gives their lives continuity, unity, and coherence. This is certainly plausible, yet here once again it seems clear that the connection with Kant's notion of autonomy has gone by the wayside, for Kant certainly could not have accepted that autonomous choosing can take place "regardless of whether its objects are appropriate." More strikingly, the connection with the perfectionist understanding of autonomy seems to have been rendered tenuous at best, for it seems doubtful that perfectionistic accounts of autonomy can sit comfortably beside the idea that what one chooses to care about is only constrained by the condition of giving one's life unity and coherence. This condition seems too thin to constitute the condition of a plausible perfectionism, for choices that satisfy this condition well might be opposed to other perfections constitutive of flourishing – including, say, perfections of rationality or sociality. Aristotle, at the least, would have accepted the view that the unimpeded expression of one's autonomy is constitutive of flourishing only if some further conditions regarding rationality or nobility were put on the objects of caring. A contemporary perfectionist like Thomas Hurka – who explicitly defends autonomy as a valid component of Aristotelian perfectionism – would agree:

A...serious impediment [to the absolute value of autonomy] comes from the recognition of perfections other than autonomy. No plausible value theory can treat free choice as the only intrinsic good. It must acknowledge some other goods, so that, for example, freely chosen creativity is better than freely chosen idleness, and autonomous knowledge is better than autonomous ignorance...A plausible broad perfectionism, then, can treat autonomy only as one good among others, which may sometimes be outweighed (Hurka 1996, 148-9).

As it stands, then, the condition espoused by Velleman for the objects of autonomous choice – that they give unity and coherence to the lives of the choosers – seems far too thin to support either a robust Kantian or perfectionist reading of autonomy. A Kantian understanding of autonomy must constrain the objects of choice within moral parameters, and must have no determining reference to inclination or happiness. And flourishing, on any plausible perfectionist model, demands far more than developing one's capacity to autonomously choose objects of care that give one's life unity and coherence.

It is clear that Velleman wants to consider autonomy as a perfectionist value in the Aristotelian sense. The point that I would like to press, however, is that, *as it stands*, Velleman's understanding of rational autonomy seems to amount to no more than personal autonomy. It doesn't matter overmuch if the nomenclature is resisted, so long as the practical implications of the conception of autonomy defended by Velleman are what I believe them to be. And it is these implications, I believe, that yield difficulties for Velleman's endorsement of seeking to

bring about the full flowering of autonomy for those we love. To see why this is the case, though, it is necessary to say a bit more about personal autonomy.

Personal Autonomy

Put most generally, personal autonomy is the property possession of which allows a person to effectively express his or her authentic identity (Frankfurt 1988, Dworkin 1988). One's identity is authentic when a preponderance of the parts that make up one's identity – one's values, preferences, wants, beliefs, aims, goals, desires, and so forth – are reflectively endorsed in a procedurally independent manner. Reflective endorsement thus constitutes a person's identification with the aspects of her identity. One is then autonomous when one possesses the internal capacities and enjoys the external enabling conditions necessary for the effective expression of one's authentic identity in action. Importantly for the present discussion, possessing autonomy both requires and reinforces a certain unity and coherence in one's identity; for without such coherence, one's identity would be too fractured to allow for effective self-determination. To be personally autonomous, then, is to be self-determining: to be effective in the expression of one's unified, authentic self.⁵

The only constraints on this kind of self-determination are formal (in a sense to be explained below). One has already been mentioned: one's authentic self must be relatively unified. A second constraint is this: one must have a positively valenced attitude towards the self that one reflectively endorses as authentic. Although it is possible to defend the idea – as Marina Oshana (2005) has – that a wider notion of authenticity should incorporate aspects of character that one merely acknowledges but does not value, the kind of authenticity that is *relevant for personal autonomy* must be positively valued. The reason for this constraint is provided by the nature of personal autonomy. Personal autonomy, as self-determination, only makes sense as the determination of oneself in accordance with aspects of oneself that one *values*. It would be highly counterintuitive to hold that one would, with the robust awareness and control constitutive of autonomy, choose to determine oneself in accordance with aspects of oneself that one does not value, at least in some way or to some extent. To choose to so determine oneself would indicate either that one in fact does value those aspects, or that autonomy is not present. The third constraint on the determination of the authentic self follows from the second: succeeding in fulfilling aspects of one's authentic identity in autonomous choice brings satisfaction. One's autonomous choices, as expressions of one's authentic identity, concern those aspects of oneself that matter most to one in terms of who one is or wants to be, and when such choices are satisfied, a sense of personal fulfilment results.

Crucially, it should be noted that nowhere in the above elaboration of the constraints on authentic identity were substantive value constraints – that is, particular values or ways of life that must be endorsed – introduced. This is an admission of prudential pluralism: different people have different authentic identities, and take satisfaction in a wide variety of different practices, activities, and ways of life. Some people – Velleman's sons, for instance – may take deep satisfaction from caring about photography and lacrosse; others may find these activities boring or distasteful. Autonomous choices, as expressions of one's authentic identity, share this normative content-neutrality. There are no substantive value constraints on the objects of

⁵ Supporting this conception of autonomy clearly requires some important assumptions about the nature of the self, self-knowledge, and self-control, among other things. For the purposes of the present discussion I will assume that this kind of autonomy is possible.

autonomous choice.⁶ This important claim about the nature of autonomous choice will, I shall argue, form the shoals against which grates Velleman's endorsement of helping the full flowering of our beloved's autonomy.

Autonomy and the Demands of Love

If we love someone, according to Velleman, we will wish to bring about her good for her sake, and the good of a person is seen as the flowering of her rational autonomy. But if the kind of autonomy that Velleman explicates amounts, at the end of the day, to no more than personal autonomy – as it seems to – then it becomes hard to see how the imperative to support the unimpeded development of one's beloved's autonomy necessarily follows. The problem, as I have already hinted, is that the expression of personal autonomy is not constrained by any substantive values whatsoever. All that is required is the satisfaction of the formal conditions of (i) unity and coherence of identity, (ii) a positively valenced attitude toward the aspect of self that one seeks to express in autonomous choice or caring, and (iii) the presence of deep satisfaction when that choice is fulfilled. The problem is that fulfilling these conditions is consistent with autonomously choosing in a manner that is antithetical to a wide variety of important moral and perfectionist goods.

Take the case of someone I loved, whom I will call Arthur. Arthur was in many ways a very good person, and more often than not I had no problems supporting what he cared about, insofar as his choices were both satisfying to him and moral – even noble. But Arthur was also an inveterate racist. His racism brought a certain unity and coherence to his worldview and action, and he received satisfaction from being aware of, or even causing, the entrenchment of racial prejudice. Now, there is a sense in which satisfying Arthur's racism was good for Arthur: it was prudentially good for him in that it made his life go better from his perspective, and unquestionably brought him personal satisfaction. But I believe that most of us would say that it is not good for him in all senses – certainly not morally. I loved Arthur, but I would consider myself a poor beloved if I did not try to *challenge* the flowering of his autonomous will in such cases *for his own sake*, and *out of love for him*, even if it made him unhappy. Of course there are different ways to do this, and perhaps the most loving would be to seek to effect that goal with a concomitant expression of compassion, and a sustained attempt to speak in terms of reasons rather than to resort to forms of manipulation or deception.⁷

Loving someone brings with it a concern for that person's good, but the totality of what is good for a person – what one should support and promote – is not confined to what is prudentially good for him (that is, what satisfies his personal interests). Moral goods such as the

⁶ The only possible exception to this claim comes from the idea that we cannot reflectively endorse ways of life that involve a focus upon certain (putative) intrinsic prudential 'evils' such as death, pain, and suffering as such (that is, without inclusion within a wider valuational system that renders such prudential evils meaningful). In claiming that autonomy is content-neutral – this one possible exception notwithstanding – I am taking issue with theorists who defend substantive accounts of personal autonomy. As I will not provide here a robust defence of this view, I refer the reader to what I believe to be an excellent defence of the content-neutrality of autonomous choice: see Friedman (2003), 19-25.

⁷ It might be interjected that more needs to be said at this point as to why the lover's set of moral norms should become reasons to which the beloved's autonomous self should be responsive, given that the lover's norms could very well be arbitrary or mistaken. This concern is very well taken, but this, it seems to me, is a separate discussion that is unnecessary to resolve in order to make progress in the present work. I might also note that I have chosen the case of Arthur partially because the racist norms that he accepted are, to most minds, quite clearly immoral.

development of capacities for compassion and justice, and perfectionist goods such as the development of capacities for rationality and sociality, should also play a part. Aesthetic goods should as well. These different kinds of goods, it must be noted, are conceptually distinct. Although they certainly can exist together – one can derive prudential value from being moral, for example – there is no logical or conceptual guarantee of an inherent connection between them. One may derive prudential value from objects, events, states of affairs, and activities that entirely lack moral, perfectionist, or aesthetic value (see Sumner 1996, 20-25). And it is precisely this conceptual separation that drives the necessity to challenge a beloved's (admittedly prudentially valuable) personal autonomy when it threatens important goods of other kinds.

Velleman writes, "Not all of [one's] ends are of significant importance to his good – only those which he cares about in the way that sustains his desire for them. Things are worth caring about in that way because desires so sustained give structure and unity to his life, thereby providing scope for the fullest realisation of his autonomy" (Velleman 2008, 210). Yet if one's beloved can gain unity and structure in his life through the realisation of autonomous choices that are morally questionable or even depraved, then it becomes hard to see how one's loving that person would require supporting the full realisation of his autonomy. The root problem in Velleman's account is that the notion of autonomy that he defends seems to allow for such unacceptable expressions of autonomy; and as a result, his explication of the demands of love is rendered untenable.

Modifying Velleman's Account

At this point, it might seem that modifying Velleman's account to avoid the unwanted conclusions just mentioned would be an easy matter of introducing or clarifying further constraints on the objects of autonomous choice. Velleman could do this, for instance, by retreating to a Kantian conception of autonomy, in accordance with which all of the objects of autonomous choice will be morally permissible. Or Velleman might develop further the latent perfectionist resources in an Aristotelian account of flourishing. Velleman did not avail himself of these options in "Beyond Price", and the only condition that he introduces on the object of autonomous willing – that it conduce to the unity and coherence of the chooser's life – is, as we have seen, satisfied by personal autonomy. But such a modification, it might seem, would be relatively straightforward. I do not believe that it would be, however, for at least two reasons.

First, by adding further conditions on the objects of autonomous willing, Velleman would be forced to disavow his endorsement of Frankfurt's account of caring, which explicitly involves the accession that the importance of caring for something – bringing unity and coherence to one's life – is *independent* of the value of the object of choice. On a revised account that includes further conditions on supportable or acceptable objects of autonomous choice, the fact that a beloved cares about something – however deeply – would, by itself, provide little reason to seek to secure or promote it out of love for the beloved, no matter how beneficial it might be in terms of conducing to the unity and coherence of the beloved's life. A sustained desire for something that brings unity and coherence to one's life – however strong – would not, of itself, be enough to generate weighty demands for its support.

Second, and relatedly, Velleman would have to introduce an asymmetry in his view between what we appreciatively respond to when we love someone and what we should want for the beloved's own sake. Velleman holds the view that when we love someone, we focus

“appreciative attention solely on him...Each person is special in the sense that he deserves to be valued singularly in this manner, as he is in himself” (Velleman 2008, 200). On this view, what we love about someone is unique to him: the particular expression of their autonomy. On the view of autonomy defended by Velleman, there is a symmetry between what we respond to when we love someone (the unique expression of their autonomy), and what we should want for the beloved’s sake (the flourishing of the unique expression of their autonomy). Yet if Velleman introduces perfectionist or moral constraints on the expressions of autonomy that deserve support, an asymmetry results: on the one hand, one loves someone in all of their uniqueness, but on the other, what one wants for the beloved is not necessarily indexed to the unique expressions of their autonomy. This would be the case, for example, when those whom we love autonomously choose ends that are unacceptable from a moral or perfectionist point of view. The result of this asymmetry is a weakening of the view that what love demands in relation to the beloved is indexed precisely to the beloved. On this new view – and in accordance with the consequences of giving up endorsement of Frankfurt’s account of caring – what love demands may often have nothing to do with what the beloved actually cares about. Indeed, it may concern promoting something the beloved actually hates, something that would make the beloved’s life prudentially worse (although in as loving a manner as possible, of course). Some – myself included – would consider such a modification an improvement, but it would require a not inconsiderable modification of Velleman’s views on what love demands in relation to the beloved.

Conclusion

In this paper I have not sought to provide an alternative to Velleman’s theory of love, or to proffer a complete alternative to his view of the demands of love. And certainly much more needs to be said about how to balance the demands to support different kinds of goodness. My goal has been to uncover the form of autonomy operative in Velleman’s account, and to show that a clearer understanding of its nature suggests the desirability of a revision of Velleman’s views consisting of an explicit introduction of constraints on support for the autonomy of one’s beloved. Perhaps a wider aim has been to temper an apparently widespread confidence in the categorical correctness of respecting the autonomy of others (where ‘respect’ is understood as allowance and enablement). I have not meant to imply that developing the capacity for personal autonomy in one’s beloved is unimportant. Without question it is – especially in relation to the prudential value gained by the autonomous person from expressing her authentic self through fulfilled autonomous choice. But it is not an absolute value; and in cases where the full expression of a beloved’s autonomy would hinder the development of other important goods, one’s love for another requires that one thwart their autonomy, precisely out of love.

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