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Francisco Varela and the Concept of Autonomy

Summary:

Starting from Varela's epistemological reflections, the author attempts to review, in short fragments, the history of the concept of autonomy. After a brief reference to the Ancient Greeks, the author's attention focuses on the tension between will and desire that characterized the concept of autonomy in Rousseau and Kant. After briefly considering Kant's image of the baby-walker, the investigation moves to Hegel and his master/slave dialectic and, on the basis of reflections by Jessica Benjamin, to Winnicott and his idea of a child's autonomization in his relation to the mother. Via a brief comparison between Winnicott's concept of third area and Bateson's idea of frame, the author signals out Winnicott's reflection as a decisive moment for the idea of autonomy in relations. The goal of this attempt consists in putting forward an idea of autonomy capable of cohabiting with the concept of relation without opposing it, and that may at the same time satisfy certain requirements set by research like Francisco Varela's.

Francisco Varela's concept of autonomy and closure may be considered in accordance with the idea of coherence of the system and in opposition to the ideas of correspondence, adaptation and representation. The reason for his strategic choice lies in his refusal to conceive of a living system as being in conformance with patterns and structures of some "plan," with regard to instruction, or to copying. The relation between the system and its environment is established, not on the basis of an ontological correspondence, but as starting from the "desire for autonomy with regard to one's own environment. This means that the predominant phenomenon becomes the fact, which is that the system deals with the environment according to its own internal structure" (Varela 1987, pp. 66-7). Thus the system is considered on the basis of its own coherence and not from within some "plan" that the system is seen to incorporate, due to a theorized (presumed) correspondence and mirroring between the internal structure of the system and the outside world. "In other words," as Varela points out, "one must understand the system as an autonomous cognitive system: an active and self-renewing collection of structures able to inform (or shape) the environment that surrounds it as 'world,' by a process of structural coupling with it" (Varela 1978, p. 67).

But this process of structural coupling, by denying the need for correspondence and reflection, means it is a different way of considering the relation between the system and the world. Perhaps here one should ask, "in what way do the concepts of autonomy and relation interact? And in what way are the concepts of autonomy and dependence related?" In fact, the process of structural coupling, inasmuch as it involves relation, also involves mutual dependence between systems endowed with autonomy. The fact that living systems are considered autonomous and able to interact with their surroundings depending on their internal structure, involves a modality of relation and dependence, and the concept of autonomy need not necessarily and surreptitiously be paired with an idea of solitude and isolation.

My theory is that autonomy and dependence are concepts by no means in opposition to each other, but are instead complementary. The purpose of this paper is to present, in brief yet interrelated passages, the history of the concept of autonomy, in order to propose an idea of autonomy that is not in opposition to relations of dependence, but can satisfy certain of the requisites demanded by Varela's research.

The Greeks

The term autonomy originally meant independence, understood as the political capacity to govern oneself by one's own rules. This is the meaning of autonomy, which we find, for example, in Herodotus(1) and in Thucydides(2). For the fathers of historiography, autonomy had a fundamentally political value. In fact, the word refers only to the political independence of men and, above all, of peoples.

Originally, therefore, the term autonomy had no relation to nature and living beings. And even if Cornelius Castoriadis (1988), in a fine speech given some years ago at a meeting in Florence on the theme of Physis, rightly pointed out that in Aristotle the concept of Physis, in at least one of its meanings, referred to the principle of autonomy of movement, still in ancient Greece the word "autonomy" referred solely to the political sphere.

And Castoriadis is well aware of the contrast between these meanings. When he refers to the social and human connotation of the term, he says (Castoriadis 1988, p. 50):

We conceive of autonomy as the capacity, of societies or of individuals, to act deliberately and clearly, to modify their laws, that is to say, their form. The nomos becomes an explicit self-creation of form, which makes it, at one and the same time, appear as the opposite of physis but also as one of its destinations.

The moderns: will vs. desire

The opposition between the natural world and the human and social world is a characteristic element of modern philosophical reflection on the concept of autonomy, which thus, in a certain sense, becomes radicalized.

In fact, if we consider the first great mind to interpret liberty in terms of autonomy—I am referring to Jean-Jacques Rousseau—we notice that his definition is constructed in total opposition to a certain "natural condition" that enslaves us. In the Social contract Rousseau writes:

We might, over and above all this, add, to what man acquires in the civil state, moral liberty, which alone makes him truly master of himself; for the mere impulse of appetite is slavery, while obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty³.

Here Rousseau contrasts the "mere impulse of appetite" with "obedience to a law, which we prescribe to ourselves"; a contraposition between the desire and the will which corresponds to slavery and liberty respectively (in terms of autonomy).

Thus, according to Rousseau, to tend toward the natural condition of desire is a sign of slavery, whereas autonomy depends on the will of men to follow the laws they have prescribed themselves.

Kant later refers to this contraposition of Rousseau's, underlining the connection between the concepts of autonomy and will. He writes:

The autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws and of all duties which conform to them; on the other hand, heteronomy of the elective will not only cannot be the basis of any obligation, but is, on the contrary, opposed to the principle thereof and to the morality of the will⁽⁴⁾.

We have heteronomy when we posit that there is a dependence of the will on a particular object, which has been invested by a desire. Therefore, autonomy is characterized as autonomy from desire (and thus from the inclinations of nature) and, in this sense, it acquires connotations of auto-referentiality. In Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals Kant writes:

Autonomy of the will is that property of it by which it is a law to itself (independent of any property of the objects of volition)... But that the principle of autonomy in question is the sole principle of morals can be readily shown by mere analysis of the conceptions of morality. For by this analysis we find that its principle must be a categorical imperative and that what this commands is neither more nor less than this very autonomy.⁽⁵⁾

But in Kant we find still another meaning for the concept of autonomy. Though he refers to the theme of contraposition between will and desire, between reason and nature, his contraposition appears within a new context. Here I refer to Kant's definition of the Enlightenment as being man's emergence from the condition of minority, and the implicit definition of autonomy as the capacity to use one's own intellect without the guidance of another. The metaphor of "maturity," and the figure of "the guide," complicate and enrich the conceptual field that includes the concept of autonomy. Even though Kant, in *An Answer to the Question: "What is the Enlightenment?"* continues to assign an important role to "will," the metaphor of majority, of coming of age, leads to the idea of a passage, while the figure of the guide introduces the problem of relation, which, to use the terminology of Foucault (whose last work is dedicated to this work of Kant), can be defined as a power relation.

Given the premises of Kant's discourse on the Enlightenment, we must consider what relation exists between "the guide" and "he who is guided," when autonomy is at stake; and ask, "is it possible to do without the guide as such?" Here both autonomy and relation are part of a complex set of relations that Kant exemplifies with the metaphor of the baby-walker.

Kant and the baby-walker

The baby-walker is a useful device for learning to walk, because it helps the child to move about as if it were walking, giving an illusion of motor autonomy that will become real only when the child is able to walk without the walker. And yet the baby-walker can also turn into a small prison, capable of creating a dependence that will require a certain effort of will on the child's part in order to give it up, if he wants to relish the pleasure of walking and then running on his own. If we compare two concepts such as security and liberty, we realize that an instrument like the baby-walker tends to fall somewhere in between, oscillating between two poles. In fact, it gives the baby a sense of safety, which may be useful in order for him to begin organizing his own ambulatory autonomy. But over time it can change from a transitional tool that may help him toward his own freedom of movement, to a real impediment. Kant was well aware of the ambiguous state of the baby-walker. In *An Answer to the Question: "What is the Enlightenment?"* he uses the example of the baby-walker to show that there are people (such as overly anxious parents who fear the dangers their baby may encounter walking alone, and who thus discourage the child's attempts at autonomy) who are ready to keep others in a condition of dependency, by hindering them from, what Kant calls, "the exodus from the condition of minority." He refers to those people who, in a certain way, exercise power by constructing their own autonomy and liberty on the dependence of those who either can't, or don't want to exit the condition of minority.

Having first infatuated their domesticated animals, and carefully prevented the docile creatures from daring to take a single step without the leading-strings to which they are tied, they next show them the danger which threatens them if they try to walk unaided. Now this danger is not in fact so very great, for they would certainly learn to walk eventually after a few falls. But an example of this kind is intimidating, and usually frightens them off from further attempts(6).

Kant's example, with its manifold aspects, suggests something particularly pertinent to our discussion: The Kantian metaphor of the baby-walker suggests that learning has to do with autonomy, and that autonomy, which is linked by Kant to the emergence from minority, emerges as a problem of power and relation. For Kant the concept of autonomy is inextricably connected to relation, a connection that Hegel, in *Phenomenology of the Mind*, captured in the paradox of the master/slave. But what does Kant answer to the question of autonomy and relation in *An Answer to the Question: "What is the Enlightenment?"* Using the metaphor of the baby-walker, preceded by the irony on the role of doctors, priests and educators, Kant suggests that autonomy, as the emergence from minority and as the capacity to use the mind without someone else's guidance, involves a change in the power relation without which the state of minority would endure, and, using Foucault's terms, would turn into a state of domination. Here we realize that, if we connect the concept of autonomy to the concept of relation, we must then

presume that learning cannot take place within a scenario in which the relations between the guide and the guided are characterized by instruction, transmission, plan, information, or representation. Instead it must necessarily take place within a situation in which each must develop his/her own capacity to incorporate what he receives from the other, at the same time learning, not to do without the other, but to transform the scenario of dependence into the interplay of relations between individuals, each one remaining closed and opaque to the other.

A first important step in this direction consists of Hegel's master/slave dialectic, while a second step is in Winnicott's mother-baby dialectic.

Hegel and Winnicott

There are various ways of imagining and representing the connection between autonomy and relation. The setting for the great character created by Defoe and loved by Rousseau, the solitary and shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe, shows us all the limitations of a concept of individual autonomy based on the isolation of the individual. Furthermore, when Robinson's isolation is ended by the unexpected appearance of Friday, we can detect the limitations of a form of learning based on how the first relates to the second as a teacher (since he is the master), and as a master (since he is a teacher).

But there is still another type of connection between autonomy and relation. The American psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin points out that, in the relation with the other, both in terms of power and of learning, it is impossible to escape the relation, and at the same time, it is damaging to crystallize the relation on an authoritarian basis.

Referring to Hegel's master/slave dialectic, and to Winnicott's reflections on learning and to mother-child dialectic, Jessica Benjamin (1988) writes:

Hegel postulates a Self that has no intrinsic need of the other, but uses the other just as an instrument of self-reassurance. This monadic I, interested only in himself, is substantially the same one postulated by classic psychoanalytic theory. For Hegel, as for classic psychoanalysis, the Self starts from a condition of omnipotence (everything is an extension of myself and my power), that wants to assert itself in the encounter with the other who it now sees, is similar to itself. But it cannot because, in order to assert itself, it has to recognize the other, and recognizing the other would mean denying its own absoluteness. The necessity of recognition involves this fundamental paradox: in the same moment that we realize our independence, our independence depends on its recognition, on the part of the other. At the very moment in which we come to understand the meaning of "I, myself", we are obliged to see the limits of that Self. As soon as we understand that separate minds can share the same mood, we realize that they can also disagree.

So, in Hegel, the recognition of the other appears as an ironic reflection on the omnipotence of the master, at the very moment that the latter is looking for an auto-confirmation of his control over the other.

This paradox concerning the need for recognition, depending on the other at the very moment we affirm our own autonomy, is the essential condition for what can be called the construction of individual autonomy within a relation (and not as a result of its destruction).

Jessica Benjamin draws from both the Frankfurt school and from Winnicott, and it is the latter who most inspires her entire line of thought. Referring to Winnicott's essay, "The Use of an Object and Relating through Identification," in which he theorizes the child's need to destroy the object as a necessary passage for recognizing the other, Jessica Benjamin writes:

Winnicott explains that the recognition of the other involves a paradoxical process in which the object is always destroyed in fantasy. The theory that placing the other outside us means destruction in any case has often raised doubts. And yet, intuitively, one feels that it is very simple. Winnicott means that the object has to be destroyed inside in order for us to understand that it has survived outside; in this way we can recognize it as not subjected to our mental control. This relation between destruction and survival is a reformulation and a solution of Hegel's paradox: in the fight for recognition, each subject has to risk his own life, and has to fight to deny the other—and woe betide him if he manages to do it. In fact, if I completely

deny the other, he does not exist; and if he does not survive he will not be there to recognize me. But, in order to realize this, I must try to exert such control, and try to deny his independence. To verify whether he exists, I must desire to be absolute and completely alone, then, opening my eyes, as it were, I can realize that the other is still there. In other words, destruction is an effort to be seen as different(7).

Beyond Hegel and the psychoanalytic interpretation that Jessica Benjamin gives of him, we add that recognition of oneself and others is a decisive passage toward egalitarian relations, starting from the affirmation of diversity.

Therefore, the child begins to gain his autonomy first by deceiving himself that he is alone, through the imaginary destruction of the object, and then by verifying that the other exists. In this passage, the process of becoming autonomous develops within the relation with the other, that is, not by severing the ties with the other, but by transforming them. The two opposing poles of this process are:

- a) Autonomy as cancellation of relation and isolation (Robinson);
- b) Dependence on the domination and the authority of the other (Robinson over Friday).

In Jessica Benjamin's words:

If the mother does not give any limits to the child, if she forgets herself and her interests and agrees to be completely controlled, she ceases to be a vital other for the child. She is destroyed, and not just in fantasy. If she reacts by trying to break the child's will, convinced that any compromise will "spoil him"; she will instead end up inculcating in him the idea that in a relation there is space only for one I—and the child will have no other choice than to cancel his own, at least for the moment, with the hope of being able to recuperate it later, perhaps by excessively emphasizing it. It is only by means of the survival of the other that the subject can pass from the terrain of subjection and revenge to the terrain of reciprocal respect (8).

Winnicott's third area

In *The Location of Cultural Experience*, Winnicott refers to Tagore's *Gitanjali*, 60: "On the shore of endless worlds the children play"(9).

According to Winnicott this can be interpreted in the following way: the shore represents the never ending relation between man and woman; the child emerges from this union and, after a brief period becomes in his or her turn, an adult and a parent(10). Winnicott's interpretation gives a view of the child that is different from the view of its mother or of some outside observer:

There may be an uncomplicated point of view of the child, which is different from that of its mother and of the observer, and it could be useful to consider this child's point of view. For a long time my mind remained in a condition of not-knowing, and this condition crystallized in my formulation of transitional phenomena. Meanwhile I played with the concept of "mental representations", and with the description of these in terms of objects and phenomena situated in the personal psychic reality considered internal; I also followed the effect of how the mental mechanisms of projection and introjection function. However, I realized that the game is not in fact a question of internal reality, nor is it a question of external reality(11).

The game thus escapes from the idea of "mental representations". If we also consider that the game, as Huizinga pointed out to Bateson, has a key role in determining the conditions of the autonomy of learning and in building the frames inside which relations between individuals are created, then it is important to recall what Winnicott says regarding this.

According to Winnicott, the game is situated at the moment when the child is a child, and is something different than either his/her internal or external reality.

Here you may ask, "where is the game?" It is situated in the common ground between the child and its mother, in a contest in which "union and separation between mother and child coexist", a common ground where the mother-child relation is constructed on a "separation that is not a separation but a form of union"(12). It is in this space that the role of the transitional object acquires meaning, in the "common

ground” in which separation and union coexist and thus characterize the third area that brings the child and the mother into relation.

The transitional object determines the difference between Self and non-Self:

is in the place, in terms of space and time, in which the mother is in transition from being, in the child's mind, fused with the baby, to being experienced, on the other hand, as an object that is “perceived” rather than “conceived.” The use of an object symbolizes the union of the two things which are now separated, the child and the mother, at the point, in terms of space and time, at which their state of separation begins.(13)

Both in Winnicott, and in Gregory Bateson's game theory, relation, recognition and context are key concepts. Furthermore, identity and otherness coexist in space and time. It is the relation in which being and not being are brought together.

Both Bateson's frame and Winnicott's third area involve the preservation of union and separation, of identity and otherness.

Regarding Bateson's reflection on the question of illusion, Winnicott's concept of third area points out a difference. According to Bateson, in play there is a conscious acceptance of the illusion, just as there may be in poetry, cinema or theatre: the frame or the context is at the same time noticed and not noticed. In the relation between mother and child, according to Winnicott, the illusion that the child experiences, in a certain way seems to conform to the condition described by Bateson concerning play.

In Winnicott's opinion, transitional phenomena form the learning phase for the child's use of illusion and this phase is crucial because it helps him to mediate between his primordial subjective sense of omnipotence and the testing and verification of objective reality. Winnicott writes:

The middle area I am referring to, is the area that the child is allowed between primary creativity and objective perception, based on the experience and testing of reality. Transitional phenomena represent the first stages of the use of illusion, without which there is no meaning for the human being in the idea of a relation with an object that is perceived by others as external to that human being(14).

From this point of view, Bateson's meaning of play, in which there is already the ability of the participants to create metacommunication, meaning that they are able to communicate to each other the phrase “this is a game” and then, in an even more complex and advanced dimension, pose the question “is this a game?”, belongs to a more advanced stage of the development of the faculty of learning and communication. It presupposes an autonomy of the participants that is not yet given in Winnicott's mother-child relation, whose purpose is precisely the formation of the child's autonomy, created within the relation itself that is destined to change and yet remain.

Keeping in mind what has been said up to this point, we can assume that the message “this is a game” is at the root of what we can call conscious involvement, in which the frame is at the same time perceived and not perceived. This conscious involvement, in turn, might have originated from the child's capacity to remain alone in the presence of the mother, in a relation in which the illusory aspect that the child is subjected to plays a decisive role in the process of learning and autonomization, which in turn are characterized by the ability to create and move through contexts.

So, if we place Winnicott's concept of the third area as a phase of the evolution of learning and autonomy that precedes Bateson's concept of frame, that is if we take account of the difference, then it is perhaps possible to bring the theories that concern learning into relation with autonomy.

According to Winnicott, the idea of union-division is in fact epistemologically analogous to the frame that both is and is not perceived, according to Bateson.

Where it is not possible to control our involvement in the illusion, we approach deceit, or deliriums and madness. This can depend on the fact that the illusion is not shared, because the game of union-separation is not perceived and, therefore, the frame is not perceived.

The illusion, conceived in the terms of Winnicott's third area and of Bateson's messages of the third type, seems to correspond to the processes of organization and metaphorical self-organization of the universes of meaning that determine communication.

I started from the concept of autonomy as suggested by Francisco Varela, and proceeded to consider, in very

broad terms, how the concept of autonomy has developed, from ancient Greece to the modern age, in the political, ethical, philosophical and psychoanalytical sense. Winnicott's idea of a presence of both autonomy and relation in the mother-child relationship seems to me perfectly compatible with a conception of autonomy based on closure and coherence, and far from the ideas of correspondence, adaptation, and representation. This is not to conclude that between biological and social systems there is an ontological relation (which I do not believe). The presence of opposites, that is to say the union and the division between mother and child, relation and autonomy, can be interpreted as a history of structural coupling, meaning the history of their ways of "coupling," which is added to the history of two autonomous entities within this coupling. Winnicott adds to this the idea that the third area precedes the condition of autonomy in the relation, which is a condition that the third area also helped to create. When the mother withdraws (almost like the god of the cabala of Isaac Luria, in order to give autonomy to men and to their history), she gives the child the illusion of his omnipotence, and she concedes to him the possibility of building his own self. As a consequence of this the child gets to know the outside world, which he acts upon, and he is able to experience it from within his own structure, an interior that is becoming autonomous.

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Notes:

1 I, 96, 1; VIII, 140.a.2

2 III, 46.

3 J.J. Rousseau (1762).

4 I. Kant (1788).

5 I. Kant (1785)

6 I. Kant (1784).

7 Benjamin (1988), p. 42.

8 Benjamin (1988), pp. 43-44; Allain-Dupré & Maffei (2001), pp. 159-182.

9 Tagore (1990), pp. 86-87

10 Winnicott (1974), pp. 165-166.

11 Ibid., p. 166.

12 Ibid., p. 169.

13 Ibid., p. 167.

14 Ibid., p. 39.