

## **The Personal is (Still) Political – Collapsing the Distinction Between Personal and Political Autonomy**

The distinction between the personal and the political in terms of autonomy is usually characterised in something like the following way: personal autonomy is a matter of doing what one wants, albeit within certain limits; of being free and able to settle on the direction of one's life and work towards the values and goals that one has.

Political autonomy, on the other hand, is taken (eg by Wolff, 1998) to be the holding of certain rights against one's government and/or fellow citizens, specifically with regards to involvement with coercive institutions. We can be politically autonomous without being personally autonomous – so the agent who is not self-directed, or whose desires are inauthentic (etc) can still be politically autonomous insofar as, say, they have certain legal rights or protections with regards to voting, taxation, and so on – and by the same token we may be personally autonomous without being politically autonomous: a standard example would be the disenfranchised agent who happens to be so far off the grid that they are entirely free to pursue their self-conception.

I argue that the personal-political split is a confused one which ought not to be replicated in our conception of autonomy: someone can satisfy what we might think of as formal conditions for political autonomy (no legislative bar to engagement/voting/etc) and yet still be politically heteronomous. I claim that the best way to explain this apparent inconsistency is by pointing to exactly those kinds of relations which are taken to be important to – or constitutive of – 'personal' rather than 'political' autonomy.

There are two interlocking claims which make up my argument against the personal-political division. First, I claim that if we understand political autonomy as being limited to interactions with or powers against particular formal or legal institutions, we will be unable to satisfactorily explain why agents like the angel in the house are not able to effectively engage with political institutions. We will also be unable to explain how agents may have extensive powers to effect political change despite being formally disempowered or disenfranchised. In other words, the account of political autonomy as holding formal rights or being able to access certain decision-

making procedures casts the net both too widely *and* too narrowly in terms of capturing the character of 'political' autonomy. The second claim is that the power and authority over our lives required to be personally autonomous must include the same kinds of power and authority (or power and authority over the same kinds of areas) that are taken to be crucial to political autonomy: the personal and the political are thus different emphases on the same concept, not two different concepts with a shared foundation.