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Abstract

This paper explores the question of to what degree is autonomy necessary to nonprofit organizations and its stakeholders? As a means or as an end? Where is it expressed? What can account for its variation? Answers to these questions will affect personal and institutional decisions, both for givers and receivers of philanthropy, within the unique context of the United States. To better understand autonomy, it is necessary to examine its development historically as well as theoretically, so that we can then critically evaluate how it should relate to philanthropy, especially in nonprofit organizations.

Key words: autonomy, nonprofit organizations, ethics, philanthropy

“Indeed, the freedom to participate in critical evaluation and in the process of value formation is among the most crucial freedoms of social existence”
-Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom

Introduction

Most people have a simplistic understanding of autonomy, equating its definition to that of freedom or liberty. In this sense it is considered a value, equal to other values such as security, creativity, or respect. But how we conceptualize autonomy goes well beyond individual freedom in choosing what to think and what to do, because the very act of choosing has societal and ethical implications, in that it must address how and why choices are made, the effects the choices have on other people, and the effects the choices have on ourselves and our future. As such, it has social, political, and moral aspects, going beyond acting autonomously, to why and how this ability is rationalized and validated, in relationship to societal norms, human reasoning, values, and individual desires (Dworkin, 1988).
How we conceptualize philanthropy can also be simplistic, when it is thought of only as voluntary goodwill, charity, or even its Greek origins as “the love of humankind”, because any interventions to promote the welfare of others include assumptions and judgments around whose welfare needs to be promoted, why they have not promoted it themselves, how philanthropy should intervene, and even how welfare is defined. Philanthropy can thus be described as the “social history of the moral imagination”, where throughout history, humans have formed in each place and time their own moral agenda, defining their conception of the good life, carrying it out through service, cultural, civic, advocacy, and vanguard roles (Payton & Moody, 2008). As such, autonomy could be considered the means whereby philanthropy is expressed; or autonomy could be the end itself, with philanthropy as a means for autonomy’s expression.

Autonomy and philanthropy uniquely interact in the United States, where democratic government depends on autonomous citizens to create their own civil society; where capitalism creates the need to philanthropically mitigate the inequalities it inherently creates; and where we adhere to the Western cultural tradition’s emphasis on the individual over the collective. Thus the U.S. works to protect the rights of the individual to direct their own lives, but at the same time needs its individual citizens to act collectively to innovate and advocate for each other and the goodwill of all. But philanthropic action, such as mitigating inequality, inherently creates a two-party relationship of giver and receiver, where the autonomy of the giver usually diminishes that of the receiver. In fact, an individual’s autonomy could be diminished first by societal inequalities, and then again by the philanthropic action that prescribes its reinstatement.

The struggle for autonomy within philanthropy manifests itself especially in nonprofit organizations, as the primary vehicles for philanthropic action in the United States. Nonprofit organizations operate in all areas of society and within the five roles identified above, such as within the service role - from family housing assistance to fulfilling government contracts for mental health services; within the cultural role - from local historical societies to supporting multiculturalism in education; within the civic role - from library programs to voter registration campaigns; within the advocacy role - from equal access for persons with disabilities to addressing environmental concerns; and with the vanguard role - from cutting edge research in health sciences to developing alternative energy sources. Autonomy may actually be basic to the challenges and conflicts
within each of these areas of philanthropy, as they reflect or fail to reflect the human capacity and desire for autonomy.

To what degree is autonomy necessary to nonprofit organizations and its stakeholders? As a means or as an end? Where is it expressed? What can account for its variation? Answers to these questions will affect personal and institutional decisions, both for givers and receivers of philanthropy, within the unique context of the United States. To better understand autonomy, it is necessary to examine its development historically as well as theoretically, so that we can then critically evaluate how it should relate to philanthropy, especially in nonprofit organizations.

**Historical Development of Autonomy**

As antecedent to the idea of autonomy, philosophers in ancient Greece introduced the thought that people generally have a desire for happiness, as well as a desire for some degree of control over their own happiness, as they can reason, reflect, and rationalize their own goals (Chirkov, 2011). While this implies that personal freedom would be necessary for happiness, up until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, people lived within a hierarchy of obedience, so that despite the ability to reason, reflect, and rationalize, it was understood that obedience was basic to a good life, not only to God as religious beliefs directed, but to other authorities who were understood to be more capable than the common citizen in prescribing moral behavior within a society (Scheenewind, 1998).

Factors such as the Protestant Reformation and its challenge to the power of institutionalized religion, beginning in the sixteenth century, introduced the idea that all people have the capacity to govern themselves, as opposed to the hierarchy of obedience based on the unequal distribution of land, knowledge, or abilities. The new idea of natural law collapsed hierarchies, instead maintaining that all normal individuals had the equal capability of understanding and living within the moral restraints they placed upon themselves, participating in self-governance, without interference from government, the church, or anyone else (Scheenewind, 1998). This marked the beginning of our Western understanding of the relationship between the individual and the state, as distinguished from Eastern thinking emphasizing collectivism and shared value. (Chirkov et al, 2011).
The Enlightenment, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, exploded with philosophical thought around autonomy, as it related to moral and political theory and what constituted a good society. Social choice theory developed during this time, attempting to answer questions around the implications to individual rights, liberty, and preferences when structuring a diverse society, and whether majority rule can cause, as well as solve, societal problems (Sen, 2004). Emphasizing the rationality of mankind, Immanuel Kant provided a broad conceptualization of autonomy as self-governance – but played out within the limits of human nature, the human natural desire for autonomy, and the obligation of human beings to pursue autonomy (Guyer, 2003). John Rawls incorporated Kant’s sense of autonomy within his theory of justice, so that “the state of autonomy provides the critical link between principles of justice and the idea of free and equal human beings” (Buchanan, 2011). As such, autonomy, while giving people a before unheard of freedom to govern themselves, included a responsibility to self and society, acknowledging that rules and restraints are needed to protect autonomy within a good and just society.

After the Enlightenment, and with the rise in democratic governments, autonomy turned decidedly more individualistic, with new arguments focusing on the degree to which the individual can exercise his/her autonomy without interference by others, limited only by avoiding harm to others. John Stuart Mill’s classic essay On Liberty, declares “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant” (Mill, 2002, pg. 11). More important than whether autonomy should be considered moral, as Kant argued, or even whether autonomy should be restricted for the good of self or society, people now seem to view autonomy as a personal right, an ability, or even a competency. In fact, “the concept of autonomy is the focus of much controversy and debate, disputes which focus attention on the fundamentals of moral and political philosophy and the Enlightenment conception of the person more generally” (Christman, 2015, p. 1).

**Autonomy Defined Within Ethics**

This controversy and debate surrounding autonomy cannot be resolved without considering moral philosophy, because judgements around the rightness or wrongness of behavior begins with an understanding of the
nature of human beings and their needs, desires, and inclinations. To arrive at a robust working definition of autonomy within philanthropy, this discussion will begin with normative ethical theory, followed by Gerald Dworkin’s theory of autonomy, and Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach, along with current manifestations of each.

**Utilitarianism.** As a consequentialist ethical theory, utilitarianism enjoys considerable influence in Western cultures, defining moral action as that which contributes to the greater good. Utilitarians strive to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, such that decisions ought to be made to benefit the good of the many over that of a few, since the sum of multiple individuals’ happiness would outweigh that of only a few. (Driver, 2014). This would seem to interfere with the autonomy of individuals when their interests do not align with the majority; yet it can be understood that the happiness of the individual and of the many are not entirely independent of each other. In fact, John Stuart Mill, developing his ideas of utilitarianism after Jeremy Bentham and during a period of legal and social reform, considered the harm done to others as part of overall utility, so that the autonomy of each person had an intrinsic value as a part of human nature, and would be considered when determining overall pleasure and pain (Christman, 2015).

Stemming from more recent emphases on the scientific method and the use of rational and deterministic explanations of psychological and social constructs, it has become more widely believed that most behaviors and even most thinking, conscious or subconscious, can be classified as to their utility. The movement called “Effective Altruism” has become a popular approach to philanthropy that has made way for online charity rating systems, mathematical systems for deciding on which causes to give to, and a simple, consequentialist evaluation of what benefits the most people to the greatest degree (MacAskill, 2016).

**Deontology.** Rather than focusing on outcomes of actions, deontology judges the morality of an action on its intent, giving individuals the right, duty, and permission to pursue their own life. As such, actions may be chosen that do not maximize pleasure, and some actions that do maximize pleasure could be considered immoral. Kant’s deontology sees autonomy as necessary not only to protect against the outside forces that constrain us, but also the inclinations of self that constrain our pursuit of the life we have rationally determined (Guyer, 2003). While it may be argued that
Kant’s deontology simply moves from rule by others to self-rule, his understanding of autonomy as responsibility has influenced and continues to influence many of our contemporary theories around autonomy, morality, and human rights.

Proceeding from Kant’s autonomy, contemporary philosopher Hannah Arendt speaks to the problem of people’s individual rights as subdued or even destroyed by the rights of the state, and the need to protect those rights to remedy the state itself. She further distinguishes between ‘civic’ rights as those which the government must protect, and a more fundamental kind of rights, which she labels the ‘right to have rights’ – in which our very humanity desires and demands the ability to think, speak, and act meaningfully (Parekh, 2004).

**Virtue Ethics.** In contrast to morality based on what we ought to do, as in utilitarianism and deontology, virtue ethics focuses on the kind of person we ought to be, such that we continually strive to develop positive character traits, assumed to be innately and internally generated, but with a need to be cultivated. Current interest in virtue ethics has risen following scandals in both the business and nonprofit sectors, where it has become apparent that only situationally judging actions as moral or immoral can lead to a multitude of unenforceable laws, as well as to a multitude of signed codes of ethics, trying to curtail self-interest. Contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre promotes virtue ethics as a return to Aristotelian values, where instead of following liberal capitalist ideology, people should be challenged to develop purpose and meaning within communities, working toward a moral code and acquiring virtue (Clayton, n.d.).

**Gerald Dworkin.** Contemporary intellectual thinking on autonomy is heavily influenced by Gerald Dworkin, an American distinguished professor and researcher whose book, entitled *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, gives not only the justification for how to think about autonomy, but also the practical ramifications of autonomy as the human capability of higher-order thinking (Dworkin, 1988). Dworkin conceives of autonomy as:

“a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes, and so forth and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values. By exercising such a capacity, persons define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives, and take responsibility for the kind of person they are” (Dworkin, 1988, p. 20).
This conceptualization of autonomy as much more than simple freedom or liberty, incorporates the human ability to think and reflect at a much deeper level, placing responsibility on human beings for the consequences of their actions as they affect themselves and the world. Dworkin recognizes that people have varying degrees in ability or desire to self-reflect and use their higher-order preferences, as well as varying circumstances that affect their desire for autonomy, and varying perceptions of their capacity for autonomy. In fact, Dworkin argues that the intrinsic value of autonomy is not necessarily having choices, but in being “recognized as the kind of creature who is capable of making choices” (Dworkin, 1988, p. 80).

Capabilities Approach. Amartya Sen, noted scholar, author, and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in Economics, developed a capabilities approach to human behavior, which recognizes the diversity of humans, not only in what they are born with, what they have, and what has happened to them, but in what they desire. He argues that basic freedoms and rights are important not only because they are intrinsically valuable and provide people with incentives for growth, as outcomes, but also because the very process of exercising freedom generates values and priorities (Sen, 1999). Sen’s capabilities approach goes beyond Kant’s or Dworkin’s concept of autonomy, where autonomy is a moral right and responsibility of all human beings, to a process whereby all human beings should possess the capabilities that can be of use to them, equitably distributed and considering each person’s innate traits, circumstances, worldviews, and culture. Thus, capabilities are the vehicle by which autonomy is possible.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum builds on Sen’s capabilities approach but universalizes the capabilities by setting forth a minimum threshold for each person, broad enough to be agreed upon across nations and worldviews, provided for politically, and with the capabilities of a person as ends in themselves, not just means. She sets forth ten capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one’s environment, political and material. (Nussbaum, 2000). While autonomy is not specifically used as one of Nussbaum’s capabilities, many aspects of Kantian autonomy are seen within Nussbaum’s capability “practical reason”.

59
Model of Autonomy

The moral considerations discussed above can contribute to a robust conceptualization of autonomy, one which incorporates aspects of each ethical theory – both historical and contemporary, so that autonomy is seen not simply as a freedom or an ability, or even as an equally important value among other values. Rather, autonomy includes aspects of consequences, duty, character, responsibility, and capacity, all of which are essential to philanthropy in the United States, to conceptualize and justify how and why nonprofit organizations intervene in the lives of citizens to advocate, provide services, innovate, and promote a just and civil society. Consider the following definition: Autonomy is a basic, universal desire and human need to direct one's own life, that exists within a social context, so that by desiring it for oneself, one respects that others have the same desire. This ability to critically reflect, with higher order preferences, carries with it a responsibility to self and society for the protection and maximization of autonomy, such that decisions can be judged by the degree to which they allow people to discover and act on their own meaning of happiness, within the consequences of their autonomy on the happiness of others. As such, autonomy is the means to its own end, where the development of virtue and character can preclude assaults on autonomy, and the development of capabilities can increase autonomy.

Such a robust definition of autonomy will seek its maximization, such that it becomes an objective within nonprofit organizations, albeit within current social, psychological, political, and economic considerations that are often constraints and barriers to autonomy within philanthropy. The following model incorporates these considerations as current norms and expectations, and as future trends and changes, as they interact with the dimensions along which autonomy can vary, pragmatically visualizing the complexity of autonomy while providing for the identification of its expressions within nonprofit organizations.
Autonomy in Philanthropy

Figure 1.

Dimensions of Autonomy

Autonomy’s contribution to organizational performance has received attention, but research has not been able to substantiate its benefits, partly because of definitional and measurement problems, but also because autonomy is not necessarily efficient or financially valuable (Verhoest, et al, 2004). However, the multiple dimensions along which autonomy can be found in nonprofit organizations can speak to its influence upon much more than organizational performance, as nonprofits consider all stakeholders in their desire for impact - from donors to management to clients. The following table of dimensions to autonomy, where they are not judged as good or bad, but as variations along a continuum, can explain how autonomy can situationally vary in its expression.
### Dimensions of Autonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
<th>Whose autonomy does it increase?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Expensive</td>
<td>How many resources will it require?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Desirability</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>How badly is it wanted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Identifiability</td>
<td>Hidden</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>How easily can it be recognized?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Inter-relatedness</td>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>Detached</td>
<td>How will it affect others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sharedness</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Communal</td>
<td>Who will experience it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
<td>Future</td>
<td>When will it be changed?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Norms and Expectations**

Within cultures, people share a common awareness of expected thought and behavior, specific to their personal, social, political, or economic situation. While it may seem that some cultures value autonomy more than others, depending on the degree to which they are individualistic, collectivist, horizontal, or vertical cultures, researchers found that the desire for autonomy exists within all cultures, as the desire to act for the good of oneself and one’s community (Chirkov, et al, 2003). This finding is especially salient to the growing multi-culturalism of America, where the disagreements around liberal vs. communitarian or republican vs. democratic values will never be fully resolved. The following considerations, while not exhaustive, are currently relevant to autonomy within philanthropy in the United States, impacting the role of nonprofit organizations.

**Capitalism Within Democracy.** The United States is unique among counties as to the interaction of their economic and political policies, such that autonomy has a unique place within both ideals. Capitalism by nature will reduce the autonomy of citizens, partly because in the pursuit of autonomous materialistic goals, they will incur time and money pressures...
that then limit their autonomy, and partly because pursuit of these goals can lead to a decrease in autonomy of fellow citizens when competition and power relationships produce inequality and injustice (Kasser, 2011). The decrease in autonomy caused by capitalism can be mitigated in part by democracy, where citizens participate in elections, form policies, express their opinions, and promote the common good, thus limiting inequality and injustice. In fact, the legal policies and practices around philanthropy in the U.S. developed within a very complex interplay of economic, political, and social forces throughout its history, resulting in changing perceptions of public and private responsibilities, leaning more towards private responsibility than other countries, although continuing to evolve (Hall, 2001). This results in the private forces of the market furthering the autonomy of only some Americans to make money and prosper - inherently destroying the autonomy of others, with the nonprofit sector as moderating these abuses, ensuring that all citizens can democratically participate in their society.

**Resource Dependence Theory.** Operating under the assumption that economic resources are limited, resource dependence theory explains the desire of nonprofit organizations for autonomy, while operating in a world where there exists a continual struggle for limited resources that are obtainable only from the environment. As such, their power and control become limited because they must give up autonomy to obtain the resources they need to fulfill their mission, becoming dependent on the government or other nonprofits as they collaborate or even merge in order to remain viable (Malatesta & Smith, 2014). Nonprofit organizations often inadvertently sacrifice autonomy for resources, becoming dependent on other entities, who then have the power to decide when, where, and how the resources are used.

**Self-determination Theory.** The historical movement toward individualism and liberty, especially in America, led to the appearance of self-determination theory in the late 1970’s, a psychological theory which progressed rapidly in research and scholarship since the mid 1990’s, and is currently widely accepted. Self-determination theory, as human motivation, distinguishes between autonomous motivation (intrinsic as values and identity) and controlled motivation (extrinsic as rewards or punishments), finding that these two types contribute to significantly different outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008). It gives insight into the shift from thinking of autonomy as moral freedom to autonomy as an individual desire, needing
determination theory can be used to explain the behavior of any of its stakeholders, but may be most relevant within programs, in its ability to predict and shape client attitudes and behavior.

Justice. Within the 1990’s, conceptions of liberalism also shifted, away from freedom based on private ownership of property, to the belief that political legitimacy is justified only when citizens endorse the political power that results from their collective decisions. John Rawls developed his original position, where a “veil of ignorance” provided a way to make collective decisions that were fair for all citizens, because the decisions were based on justice rather than a more metaphysical understanding of what is good. This requires autonomy on the part of citizens to be able to make informed and authentic choices about the principles by which they choose to live together (Christman, 2015). However, more recently, Michael Sandel argues that prioritizing the “right over the good” is inadequate for structuring a society; first of all because there is no neutrality in decisions about what is “the right”, and secondly, because justice is based on people’s sense of individual moral identity within their community, and cannot be separated from responsibility to one’s self and one’s community (Sandel, 2009). These similar yet distinctly different conceptions of justice influence nonprofit organizations as they often need to carefully tread among the differing demands for justice from the public, their donors, and their clients.

Well-being. Despite the difficulty in conceptualizing well-being, it should not be excluded from discussions around autonomy in nonprofit organizations, as well-being is often one of the instrumental measures used in the evaluation and assessment of program outcomes, and well as being central institutionally to setting philanthropic policies aiming toward a good society. Autonomy is most often thought of as a necessary component of well-being, but in concert with other factors such as wealth, health, achievement, loving relationships, knowledge, pleasure, security, or others. But autonomy conceptualized more broadly must exist outside of a mere list of preferences for well-being, because autonomy’s function supersedes the others; that is, one needs to be autonomous to even choose which factors constitute their own sense of well-being. And yet allowing people to choose what constitutes their own well-being does not necessarily result in greater well-being! A meta-analysis of the well-being levels of people across 63 countries gives insight into this paradox, with the measurement of well-being found to be a curvilinear pattern, such that individual freedom of
choice needs to be at a basic necessary threshold, but with a saturation point, followed by decreasing well-being because of additional psychological and sociological effects, described as the “postmodern paradox” (Fischer & Boer, 2011). The researchers also found that wealth is related to autonomy, but only in the sense that it increases an individual’s ability to be autonomous, as autonomy itself was clearly found to be more correlated to well-being than was wealth. For nonprofit organizations, a robust definition of autonomy would take each influence on well-being into account, while recognizing that rather than working towards an increase in any specific factor of well-being, that an increase in autonomy could accomplish much more, and with longer lasting benefits.

**Paternalism.** Paternalism occurs when authority is used to prevent a person from making decisions or acting according to their own will, allegedly for the person’s own good. Dworkin defines paternalism more specifically with regard to autonomy as “interference with a person’s liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests, or values of the persons being coerced” (Dworkin, 1988, p. 121). Paternalism can be seen as basic to understanding the rationale for nonprofit organizations, as beliefs about paternalism are reflected especially in each nonprofit organization’s mission and programs, justifying services that may limit or increase clients’ autonomy. Decisions may need to be made around respecting someone’s autonomy and valuing their autonomy (Christman, 2014), especially when a client’s perception of their own autonomy is heavily influenced by the dysfunctional situation within which he/she has been (such as abuse, stereotyping, or addiction). Dworkin’s model of autonomy as second-order reflection on first-order preferences may indicate the need to paternalistically respect yet limit a client’s autonomy until they can gain their own normative sense of autonomy, where they can envision opportunities and understand the consequences to themselves and others that will result from their choices.

**Trends and Changes**

Changes and developments within all sectors and disciplines continue to affect the autonomy of nonprofit organizations and their stakeholders. The following considerations interact with and often modify the norms and expectations around autonomy, along the seven dimensions listed earlier.
**Locus of Control.** Trait theories of personality focus on behavior as resulting from an individual’s unique qualities, such that some individuals may desire more/less autonomy than others. Among many identified personality traits, locus of control addresses a person’s belief about the extent to which they can act autonomously. Research from 2002 found that a definite trend exists toward an external locus of control in young people in America now as compared to young people in the 1960’s (Twenge, 2002). Increasing individualism, while perhaps expected to lead to increased independence and an internal locus of control, has actually been linked to people’s sense of smallness, as they feel they have little they can do to make a difference in their world. This can lead to cynicism, alienation, and blaming others, such as institutions, for any problems. With an external locus of control, people insist on the freedom to choose, but neglect to meaningfully take part in creating and influencing opportunities, ultimately reducing autonomy. This trend toward external locus of control places increased demands on nonprofit organizations to provide services and solve societal problems, but without a corresponding emphasis on building the autonomy of stakeholders that includes consequences and responsibility.

**Cognitive Bias.** Undergirding any discussion on autonomy is the general assumption that people are rational and will make positive and reasonable choices. However, as recently pointed out by Daniel Kahneman and other cognitive psychologists working within behavioral economics, people often do not act rationally or reasonably, and often unconsciously fall prey to cognitive biases. Kahneman distinguishes between “System I” and “System II” processes, and between the “remembering self” and the “experiencing self”, explaining how people often make poor choices despite thinking they are acting autonomously and rationally (Kahneman, 2011). Regardless of how we define autonomy, it must be recognized that despite the best of intentions, it may not lead to freedom, happiness, or a life of one’s choosing, and decisions will have to be made around protecting people from their own mistakes. A robust definition of autonomy can allow for nonprofit organizations to “nudge” people, so that they consider options that will benefit them in the future, and so that they are aware of and protected against those who would use their own cognitive biases to benefit themselves (Kahneman, 2011).

**Role of nonprofits.** The philanthropic sector in America rose out of the founding fathers’ desire for freedom of religion and freedom of political association, so that Americans could pursue a better life without the
revisions they had experienced in their home countries. De Toqueville praised the civic associations he witnessed in early America as the bedrock to democracy (Mansfield & Winthrop, 2000). These associations were precursors to nonprofit organizations now, crucial to the uniqueness of American democracy, where individualism and freedom are valued and protected, where capitalism is less restricted, and where society welcomes a diversity of cultures. However, this has significantly changed since the early days of American life, as population growth and economic growth have led to restrictions on citizens’ political and economic lives, as well as to changes in the role of nonprofit organizations throughout the industrial age, the major wars, and globalization (Hall, 2016). For instance, nonprofit organizations are increasingly fulfilling the government’s role of service provider – but performance-based contracts make it very difficult to take risks that could increase the autonomy of the underserved, or advocate for solutions to systemic problems. And they are increasingly called upon, through government contracting, to remedy inequalities caused by unchecked competition in the market, where the new market-state government allows individualism to become selfishness, money to be the answer to well-being, and competition to promote efficiency (Adams & Balfour, 2010). The shifting role of nonprofit organizations in America influences autonomy among many of its dimensions, resulting in diminished expressions.

Strategy, Effectiveness, Efficiency. Following the lead of the market sector, nonprofit organizations are finding themselves increasingly bombarded with demands to be more strategic, effective, and efficient, as well as to measure, report, and analyze data – all to show impact. Impact has become a new buzz word in the nonprofit sector, as both funders and nonprofit organizations look for proof that their programs “move the needle” in a positive direction. While this focus on impact has indeed been shown to move the needle in many cases, it often fails to allow for long-term goals, goals that are not easily measured, or goals that are organic in nature, without clear and predictable outcomes. In fact, it could be said that strategy, effectiveness, and efficiency are the enemies of autonomy, as autonomy prioritizes rights, freedom, and duty over market values.

Transparency. The trend toward transparency and public accountability can have a positive effect on nonprofit organizations, in that all stakeholders can make better decisions when better informed. But it can inhibit autonomy when its practice fails to acknowledge the inability of
most people to understand and reflect on the complexity of the information available, resulting in either incorrect attributions or apathy (Christensen & Cheney, 2015). Elements of locus of control and cognitive bias can affect the interpretation of data and reports, such that how the information is documented can be more important than the information itself. Thus, while transparency and accountability idealistically increase autonomy, realistically the data, facts and outcomes are communicated without the capacity to understand and interpret them, failing to meet a robust definition of autonomy, which includes capabilities and critical thinking.

**Donor Centrism.** Beginning in the 1990’s, the degree to which donors want to control their gifts has escalated, presumably the result of wealth accumulation and the increasingly competitive nature of fundraising. Donor-centered fundraising puts the needs and desires of donors as central to fundraising efforts, focusing only on what donors want out of what should be a reciprocal relationship between funder and nonprofit organization. In fact, philanthropy can often be viewed as “a vehicle for wealthy individuals to exercise their individual needs for power, their desire for agency to shape the world as they see it, and their personal voyages of self-discovery and self-fulfillment” (Ostrander, 2007). Donor-centrism gives voice and choice to those with money, as they set agendas and dictate how, when, and where their gifts are used, even necessitating that nonprofit organizations use substantial resources in cultivating and placating powerful donors. Even with donors’ best intentions, donor-centrism exacerbates paternalism and negatively impacts the autonomy nonprofit organizations and their clients.

**Funding models.** Driven mostly by the need to find new revenue streams, nonprofit organizations have begun using business practices to more effectively address social problems, even partnering with for-profit businesses who want to be more socially responsible. Terms like “social entrepreneurship”, “venture philanthropy”, and “impact investing”, have become familiar within philanthropy, as innovative and effective models of tackling systemic problems and attaining cross-sector goals. These partnerships could restrict autonomy like any other funding arrangement according to resource dependence theory, when they are seen as ends in themselves, but they also have the potential to increase the influence of nonprofit organizations, by mainstreaming the service, cultural, civic, vanguard, and advocacy roles of philanthropy into the market sector.
Outsourcing. As the professionalization of nonprofit organizations demands greater capacity, expertise, and efficiency, outsourcing of administrative and technological tasks to for-profit companies and independent contractors has become much more common (Alaimo, 2010). This can affect an organization’s autonomy both positively and negatively, as information asymmetry (one party knowing more than the other) and bounded rationality (limited information) will limit autonomy, while outsourcing tasks will enable nonprofit organizations to devote more time and resources to their mission. This increased specialization of professional services and the careful use of limited resources, combined with the complexity of complying with legal responsibilities within nonprofit governance, may lead to more outsourcing in the future.

Expressions of Autonomy

Each nonprofit organization, no matter its size, will need to make choices that affect its autonomy both internally, as board, staff, and clients, and externally, as it exists in its broader environment. Following is a table by which nonprofit organizations can reflect on their own expressions of autonomy, appreciating how autonomy may be embedded within core assumptions about philanthropy, ethics, and culture in the United States.
Table 2.  
*Expressions of Autonomy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressions of Autonomy</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Seduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓Ideal Outcomes</td>
<td>✓Core Beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance/Management</td>
<td>✓Strategy</td>
<td>✓Management Style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓Organizational Structure</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓Policies and Procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>✓Service</td>
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<td>External Relationships</td>
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By using a robust definition of autonomy, identifying norms/expectations and trends/changes, as well as understanding autonomy’s expressions within nonprofit organizations, steps can be taken to maximize autonomy along its dimensions of cost, context, desirability, identifiability, interrelatedness, sharedness, and time.

**Mission/Vision/Values.** Within the mission/vision/values of a nonprofit organization, autonomy is expressed in answering the questions “Why are we here?” or “What is wrong that we want to make right?” Assumptions around how society “should” progress or how people “should” behave inherently contain judgments about what constitutes a good life and how each person is valued. These assumptions can result in vision statements that anticipate autonomy, values that respect each individual’s potential and capacity for autonomy, and yet mission statements that are paternalistic. A robust definition of autonomy could reconcile this difficulty by acknowledging that autonomy is a basic human need and desire,
but that it exists within a social context and within the inclinations of human nature, such that autonomy may need to be protected, and it may require higher order preferences that limit immediate autonomy in order to maximize autonomy long-term. In this sense, mission statements are the means by which the vision statements of autonomy are attained, working within the realities of the norms/expectations, and trends/changes, with success evaluated by autonomy’s expression along its dimensions.

Governance/Management. The governance/management aspect of nonprofit organizations contains a myriad of opportunities for autonomy to be both constrained and maximized, recognizing the difficulty of maximizing the autonomy of some stakeholders without restricting the autonomy of others. The board of directors could be considered capable of acting autonomously, in that they have power and control over their organization, but it could also be said that they are the most limited in autonomy. Not only do they and their executive staff operate under legal and professional mandates, but they must operate with limiting funding, unrealistic expectations, and a demand for efficiency. Strategy can be friend or foe to autonomy, as its use can either unlock potential or lock in plans that required flexibility to be effective. While the autonomy of all stakeholders may be an objective in nonprofit organizations, within governance/management it can seem more like a limited commodity, where the interactions of norms/expectations and trends/changes cause autonomy to be distributed as fairly as possible, rather than being maximized.

Programs. Central to any nonprofit organization’s existence are their programs, as they fulfill their particular role within philanthropy as service, advocacy, cultural, civic, or vanguard by nature. Dimensions of autonomy will vary by role, as will the importance of the dimensions themselves. At the heart of any philanthropic work, whether making the world better by focusing on healthcare, basic needs, arts, education, etc., needs to be a desire to enable the recipient of the philanthropy to be autonomous, even if the process consists of small steps that eventually contribute to their capabilities over their lifetime. Sen’s freedom describes autonomy as it relates to programs: “The ends and means of development call for placing the perspective of freedom at the center of the stage. The people must be seen, in this perspective, as being actively involved – given the opportunity – in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs” (Sen, 1999, p. 53).
Revenue Streams. The current practice of obtaining resources holds nonprofit organizations captive to market forces, government conflicts, and even public whim. Capitalism causes competition for limited resources, while the political fight between the left and the right as to solutions to systemic societal problems forces nonprofits to work within fluctuating and often diminished government funds. Obtaining resources from the public introduces power and paternalism from foundations and the wealthy, who may lack perspective and awareness around the recipients of their altruism. Nonprofit organizations who value the autonomy of their clients may experience difficulty in fundraising, as funders may not agree with program models that increase the risk inherent in giving clients increased autonomy, and that do not show immediate and quantifiable results. The considerable growth of fund development jobs can speak to the effect that norms and trends have had on revenue streams, as jobs are demanding and stressful, with limited autonomy. However, the “blurring of boundaries” between the three sectors has increased the autonomy of nonprofit organizations by developing more fee for service opportunities and corporate partnerships, allowing for independence from government mandates and funders’ whims.

External Relationships. Institutional autonomy of nonprofit organizations can be expressed in their choices to collaborate, compete, or segregate, not only for funding, but for sustainability and impact. It may be beneficial in some cases to align more closely with government entities, but in other situations to independently develop innovative solutions, which can then influence government policies. Grass roots organizations may need to collaborate with larger nonprofit organizations to become legitimate, and yet may end up competing as trends cause increased need or capacity. Corporate partnerships may provide opportunities to walk away from government or foundation grants, while still acknowledging their dependence on business success. In each case, nonprofit organizations need to carefully evaluate the external relationships that affect their autonomy.

Conclusion

Autonomy is not one value among many others. It should not be an afterthought within philanthropy. Robustly defined, autonomy offers the means whereby people can both imagine and attain their ends. That is, the capacity to self-reflect and to reflect on the perspectives of others, shifting through history and emerging within contemporary moral theory, leads to
what we believe should be the ends – autonomy, as well as being the process by which we can attain those ends. Essential to philanthropy, autonomy provides the means whereby wrongs are righted and society is enriched, and thus should be maximized in its expressions within nonprofit organizations, along its dimensions and as influenced by norms and trends. Thus, autonomy is critical to nonprofit organizations as they by nature incorporate the personal, social, political, and moral facets of human existence and meaning.
References


About the Author

Bev Harkema competed both the Master’s in Philanthropy and Nonprofit Management (2018) and the Bachelor’s in Psychology (2008) at GVSU. She desires to use her experience in business, her coursework at GVSU, and her graduate assistantship at the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, in combination with her interests in cognition, behavior, personality, philosophy, theology, and social justice, to work and volunteer more effectively and meaningfully in the nonprofit sector. She currently works at Bridges of Hope, Allegan County, a grassroots nonprofit dedicated to helping people move out of poverty by providing tools, education, support, and access to community resources. She is also dedicated to maximizing the autonomy of people with disabilities by her involvement with Alternatives in Motion, a local nonprofit providing mobility equipment to underserved populations, and by raising foster puppies for Paws with a Cause, a local dog assistance organization.