

# On Rationally Valuing One's Life

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# The Setup

- David Velleman (1992/2015b; 1999; 2008a) objects to *much of* the defense of euthanasia on grounds of personal autonomy and the patient's dignity.
- *Autonomy* and *dignity* are notions that originate out of Kantian moral theory, and lose their moral significance when removed from that context (2015b).
- But it would be very surprising if Kantian moral theory supported a robust right to die.

# The Setup

- The response: Kantians don't own the word "autonomy."
- Since Harry Frankfurt's work (1971; 1987; 1998a; 1998b; 1998c) at least, there has been a conception of self-governance that is explicitly anti-Kantian in its assumptions about what the self is.

# The Setup

- That conception of the self is psychologically and metaphysically more plausible than the Kantian conception.
- Its moral significance is defensible.
- It would seem to support an *extremely* robust right to die.

# The Setup

Division of the talk

1. Velleman's arguments.
2. The Frankfurtian conception of autonomy and its implications.
3. Can we walk some of this back?

# Velleman's Critique

The decision to terminate one's life is often defended on grounds of the patient's autonomy and dignity.



# Velleman's Critique

But, in the Kantian tradition, autonomy is ultimately based on one's capacity to determine one's choice according to laws of pure practical reason.



# Velleman's Critique

Whereas dignity is the special value that rational agents possess. It cannot sensibly be compared against the value of those agents' well-being.





# Velleman's Critique

“But the dignity of a person isn't something that he can accept or decline, since it isn't a value for him; it's a value in him, which he can only violate or respect. Nor can it be weighed against what is good or bad for the person. ...”

# Velleman's Critique

“...As I have argued, value for a person stands to value in the person roughly as the value of means stands to that of the end: in each case, the former merits concern only on the basis of concern for the latter. And conditional values cannot be weighed against the unconditional values on which they depend” (Velleman 1999).

# Velleman's Critique

- Respect for your autonomy does not mean respect for your choices, full stop.
- It does mean respect for your decisions about what is in your own interest:

“The reasons for deferring to a person's judgment about his good go beyond his reliability as a judge. Respect for a person's autonomy may require that we defer to his considered judgment about his good even when we have reason to regard that judgment as mistaken” (ibid).

# Velleman's Critique

- But the Kantian prohibition on suicide is not based on paternalism.
- Rather, it is based on each person's dignity as a person.
- Dignity is the value we possess as rational beings. This value cannot be compared against or exchanged for values of personal interest.

# Velleman's Critique

“Unlike his interest, for example, his dignity is a value on which his opinion carries no more weight than anyone else’s. Because this value does not accrue to him, he is in no better position to judge it than others. Similarly, respect for a person’s autonomy does not require deference to him on questions of his dignity, as it does on questions of his good” (ibid).

# Velleman's Critique

- What's good for me is only of value on the assumption that I am of value.
- But then it is inconsistent for me to choose to end my life on grounds of self-interest:

“A person makes a... mistake, I argued, if he sacrifices himself for the sake of something that is valuable only for his sake by committing suicide to promote his own good” (2008a).

# Velleman's Critique

- So, refusing to assist another in committing suicide on the grounds that she believes she would be better off dead is not a failure to respect her autonomy.
- Suicide should only be an option in those cases in which the agent's autonomy (as a capacity), and hence dignity are already in the process of being lost.

# The Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

- The Kantian understanding of autonomy depends on a very particular understanding of the self (as it must).
- The self or person is identified with the capacity to reason (this being the only part which is essential to any person *qua* person).
- Autonomy (self-governance) is then a matter of the self not being determined by anything outside itself.



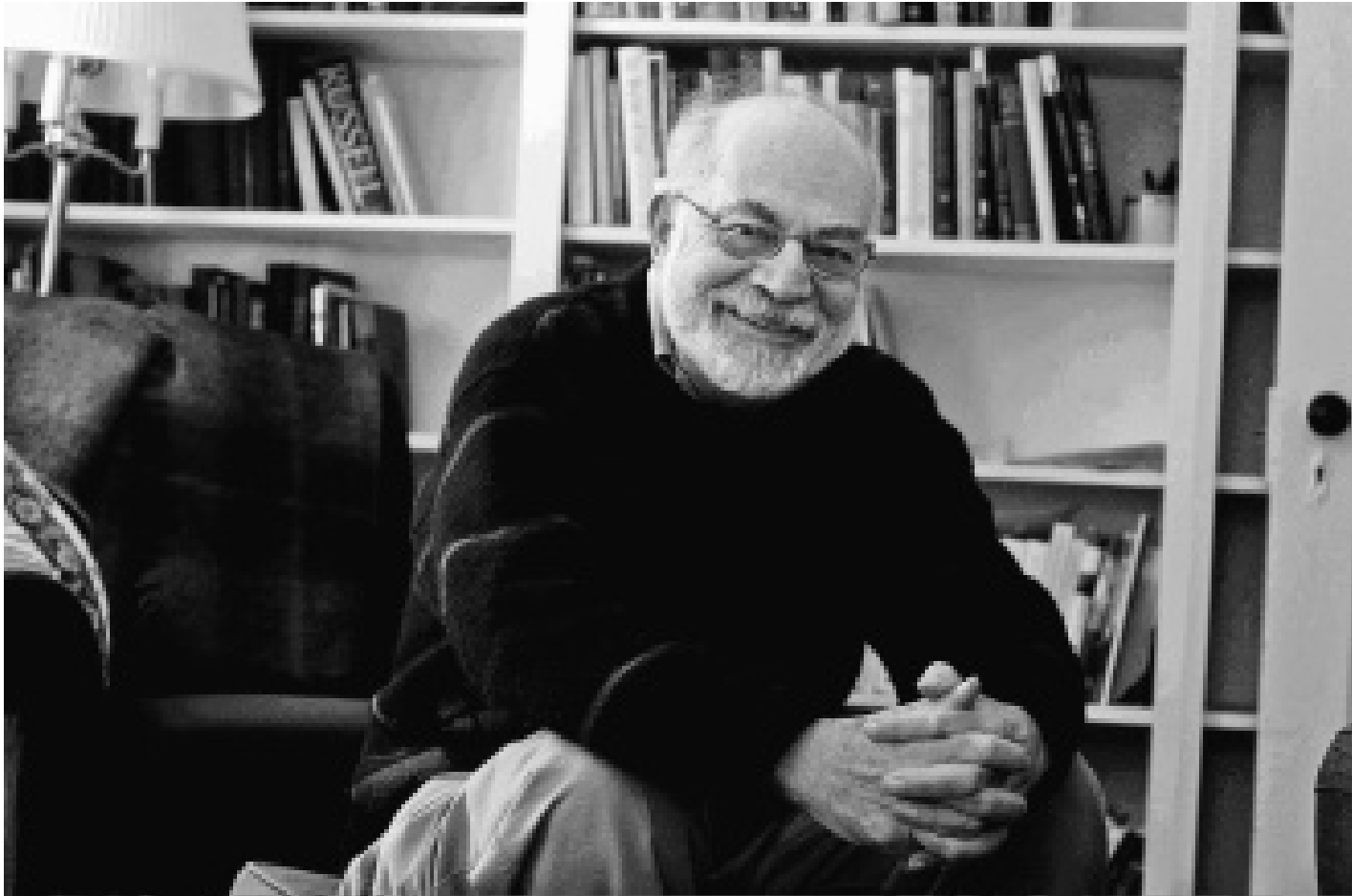
# The Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

- For the will to be determined by desires that are contingent to being a person is heteronomous.
- Velleman endorses such a roughly Kantian picture (see his 2002 and 2008b).

# The Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

- But going back at least to Harry Frankfurt's work (especially his 1998b; drawing on his 1971; and 1987), there is a tradition of conceiving of the self as *constituted* by some subset of the agent's standing motivations.

# The Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy



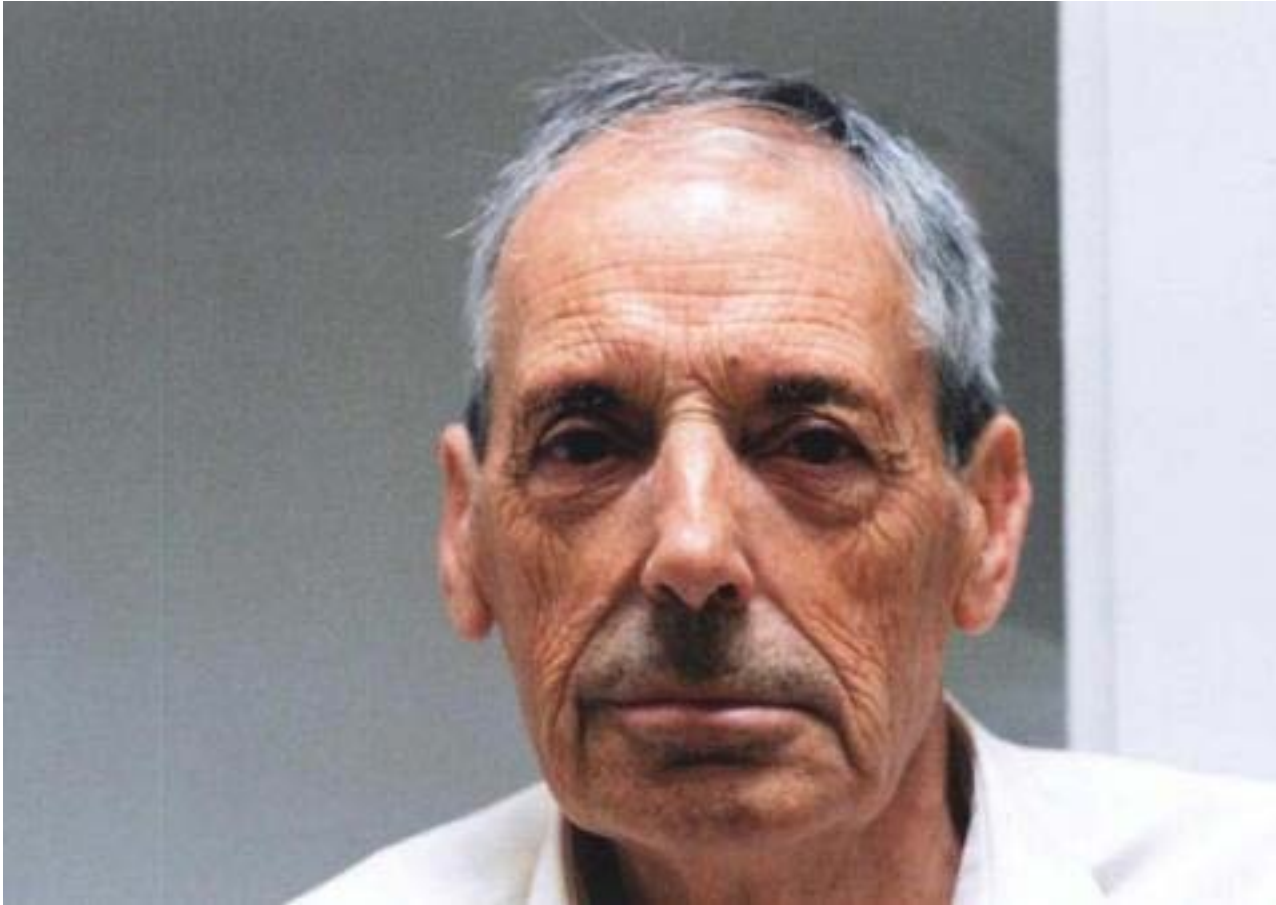
# The Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy



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# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

- Family of views (of which Frankfurt's were just several) with the common shared thesis:

Some portion of an agent's motives constitute that agent's personality (or "speak for the agent," as Bratman 2000) puts it.



# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

- These motives are importantly **stable**, and usually (depending on the theorist) the targets of some form of reflective endorsement.
- Agents are autonomous when they act on these motives, and not autonomous when they act contrary to them on the basis of non-constituting motivations.

# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

Normative significance of autonomy on this understanding:

- Harmonizing attractions of positive and negative theories of liberty.
- Personal authenticity (Frankfurt, Williams, Tiberius)
- Sense of meaningfulness of one's life (Frankfurt, Williams)
- Value of self-determination or exercise of specifically human forms of agency.

# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

Normative significance of autonomy on this understanding:

- *Personal* survival (Parfit, Frankfurt, Bratman)

# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

- Frankfurt argues that these identity-constituting motives derive their normative force for the relevant agent from the force of self-preservation (1998b).
- Bratman makes similar points, explicitly connecting the idea of self- or personality-constituting motives with a Lockean theory of personal identity (2000).

# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

- Very roughly, a Lockean theory makes personal survival a matter of psychological continuity.
- As Parfit observed, this means that survival comes in degrees.
- Not all psychological states need to count equally towards one's survival, however (Parfit 1984).

# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

- So abandoning some self-constituting motive involves a substantial loss of psychological connectedness to a future agent—substantially reducing the degree to which one survives.

# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

- Velleman critiques this understanding of personal survival and identity in his (1996; 2002; and 2008c).
- Lockean conception is the dominant theory of personal identity in the literature.
- Frankfurt: Pure reason does not *individuate agents* (1998b).
- Frankfurt: Most people do not care that much about the demands of reason (1998b).

# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

What does this imply for questions about self-termination?

- Velleman's arguments limiting a right to die are incompatible with this framework.
- Reverses the order of explanation: Personal commitments explain the existence of a particular person.
- A person can only preserve herself by continuing to value those commitments.



# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

More specifically, self-termination *can* be a rational exercise of one's agency when continued (biological) survival can only be purchased by abandoning a commitment that is constitutive of the person.

# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

- Survival comes in degrees, so it isn't strictly speaking accurate that the agent won't survive abandoning a self-constituting motive.
- But the lack of psychological connectedness after abandoning the motive may be extensive enough that the agent can no longer identify with her future self (and this failure of identification is a rational response to the facts).

# Frankfurtian Conception of Autonomy

- So, first-personal concern with a future self may rationally depend on the ability to maintain certain self-constituting motives.

# Walking it back

Are there reasons against self-termination in these cases?

- Moral obligations, obviously.
- But there is also a notion of *dignity* that connects to Frankfurtian pictures of the self.

# Walking It Back

- Dignity here is the value human agents have in virtue of their *capacity* to form self-constituting commitments.

# Walking It Back

- Why is this sort of dignity a value?
- General value we tend to assign to specifically human capacities.
- Any sort of liberal morality (think Mill or Dworkin) will require that we value people's capacity to set their own ends, whether those are our ends or not.

# Walking It Back

- One's psychological descendant may still potentially have the capacity to form new self-constituting commitments.
- While one will be alienated (we are supposing) to from that agent, so she is no longer an appropriate object of first-personal concern, one may still recognize her as living a worthwhile life.

# Walking It Back

Consequences of idea that survival comes in degrees:

- Maturity may require recognizing that one's identity is always in flux, that there is nothing inherently special about the current one.
- On the other hand, a future descendant who is sort-of-me but sort-of-not-me often strikes us as an especially bad future.



# Recap

1. Velleman's argument only works if you presuppose a Kantian picture of the self.
2. A very broad right to self-termination is consistent with autonomy on at least one widespread conception of what autonomy consists in.
3. On the other hand, ideas of dignity and the fluidity of personal identity make the issue more complicated, and unfortunately inconclusive.

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