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### AUTONOMY AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO JOSEPH RAZ'S CONCEPTION OF THE SELF-GOVERNING AGENT

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#### Abstract

Autonomy and moral responsibility are central concepts in contemporary moral and political philosophy, underpinning debates about personal freedom, accountability, and the legitimacy of authority. Joseph Raz's philosophical account provides a sophisticated framework that links individual self-governance to the ethical evaluation of human action. According to Raz, autonomy is not merely independence from external interference but the capacity to shape one's life by making informed, valuable, and rational choices. This capacity is inherently normative, grounded in the notion that autonomy enables individuals to pursue objectively valuable options and achieve well-being. Raz further contends that social and institutional structures play a crucial role in enabling autonomy, suggesting that legitimate authority serves to guide rather than constrain self-governing agents. Moral responsibility, in Raz's view, presupposes autonomy: only those capable of rational self-direction can rightly be held accountable for their actions. This paper critically examines Raz's conception of autonomy, exploring its conditions, limits, and implications for moral responsibility. It evaluates both the strengths and challenges of his framework, particularly in addressing internal constraints, social influences, and value pluralism. The paper also considers the relevance of Raz's ideas for contemporary ethical, legal, and political contexts, including moral education, civic responsibility, and debates over individual rights in complex societies. By situating autonomy within a relational and normative framework, Raz offers a nuanced account that integrates individual freedom with social embeddedness, providing a robust philosophical foundation for understanding moral responsibility.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Moral Responsibility, Authority, Self-Governance, Normative Ethics, Value Pluralism.

## Introduction

In contemporary moral and political philosophy, autonomy figures as a central normative ideal underpinning discussions about individual freedom, moral agency, and accountability. Autonomy denotes not merely negative liberty (freedom from interference) but the capacity for self-governance and rational self-direction a concept central for attributing moral responsibility and for justifying liberal political institutions. Philosophers such as Seana Shiffrin (2014) emphasize that meaningful autonomy depends on social conditions that allow individuals to form and pursue their own goals without undue oppression or domination, situating autonomy within broader ethical and legal discourses on equality and justice. At its historical core, autonomy is most famously articulated in Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy. For Kant, autonomy means the capacity to legislate moral law for oneself through practical reason; moral obligations derive their normative force from this self-legislative capacity, not from contingent desires or external determinants. Contemporary scholars continue to debate and refine this legacy, contrasting Kantian moral autonomy with more socially embedded accounts. In recent years, philosophical work has broadened these discussions to incorporate procedural, substantive, and relational dimensions of autonomy. Some, following John Christman, (2009) argue that autonomy involves not just formal capacities for choice but the ability to critically endorse one's own values in light of personal history and social context. Others, like Marina Oshana and contributors to *Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression*, emphasize that autonomy and responsible agency are shaped sometimes constrained by social structures and oppressive conditions, such that genuine agency requires more than mere procedural capacities. These developments highlight that autonomy as a philosophical concept is both richer and more complex than simple libertarian or Kantian templates.

Despite its normative prominence, linking autonomy to moral responsibility poses significant challenges. Traditional views of moral responsibility presuppose that agents are autonomous in a sufficiently robust sense to be held accountable for their choices. Yet autonomy can be limited by internal constraints (such as psychological manipulation or cognitive deficits) and external constraints (such as coercive social environments or structural inequalities). Philosophers like Bernard Berofsky have explored how such constraints complicate claims about moral responsibility, suggesting that constraints on autonomy may undercut the conditions necessary for moral accountability (Berofsky, 2022). At the same time, debates persist over whether autonomy should be understood strictly in procedural terms (as the capacity to act on one's own reasons) or whether substantive normative commitments are required to make autonomy a meaningful basis for responsibility. This raises the central question of this paper: How can individuals be morally responsible if their autonomy is constrained, and how should autonomy itself be defined in relation to moral responsibility? This paper addresses these questions by critically examining Joseph Raz's conception of autonomy and its implications for moral responsibility. Raz's influential account, initially developed in *The Morality of Freedom*, treats autonomy as a normative capacity that requires conditions such as adequate range of valuable options, certain mental abilities, and independence from coercion or manipulation. Raz contends that autonomy enables individuals to live lives they can author for themselves, and that social and institutional conditions play a constitutive role in enabling autonomy. The present analysis explicates Raz's view, assesses how his conception links autonomy to moral responsibility, and situates his account within contemporary philosophical debates especially those addressing procedural versus relational models of autonomy and the socio-

institutional conditions required for responsible agency. In doing so, the paper aims to clarify both the strengths and limits of Raz's framework for understanding autonomy and moral accountability in pluralistic and socially embedded contexts.

### **Autonomy and Moral Responsibility**

**Concept of Autonomy:** Autonomy, in its most fundamental sense, refers to self-governance the capacity of an individual to guide their own life according to rational deliberation and personal values. It implies independence of will, allowing agents to act according to reasons they recognize as their own, rather than merely responding to external pressures or internal compulsions (Shiffrin, 2014). Autonomy is often categorized into two interrelated forms: procedural autonomy and substantive autonomy. Procedural autonomy emphasizes the processes by which agents make decisions, focusing on formal capacities such as reasoning, deliberation, and reflective endorsement of desires (Christman, 2009). In contrast, substantive autonomy considers the content of decisions, evaluating whether the goals, values, or principles endorsed by the agent meet certain normative criteria, such as promoting well-being, respecting human dignity, or realizing objective goods (Raz, 1986). Contemporary debates highlight that purely procedural accounts may risk endorsing choices that are technically "self-directed" but morally or socially harmful, while substantive accounts may impose controversial normative standards on agents' decisions (Oshana, 2015).

**Moral Responsibility:** Moral responsibility refers to the accountability of agents for their actions, including the capacity to be praised or blamed based on the moral evaluation of those actions (Berofsky, 2012). Philosophical discussion of moral responsibility often intersects with questions of freedom, particularly in the classic compatibilist versus incompatibilist debate. Compatibilists argue that moral responsibility can coexist with causal determinism, as long as agents act in accordance with their own reasons and desires (Fischer & Ravizza, 2010). Incompatibilists, by contrast, maintain that true moral responsibility requires a stronger notion of freedom, one that excludes determinism and allows genuine origination of choice (Kane, 2011).

### **Interrelation Between Autonomy and Moral Responsibility**

Autonomy is widely regarded as a necessary condition for moral responsibility, as only agents capable of self-directed action can be meaningfully held accountable (Raz, 1986). Three key conditions are typically highlighted in the literature:

- i. **Rationality** – The agent must have the capacity for reasoned decision-making and critical reflection on motives (Oshana, 2015).
- ii. **Freedom from Coercion** – External pressures or manipulative influences must be sufficiently absent to allow authentic choice (Shiffrin, 2014; Khader, 2011).
- iii. **Authenticity of Choice** – The decisions made should reflect the agent's own endorsed values and identity, rather than uncritically adopted external norms (Christman & Anderson, 2011; Dworkin, 2011).

Together, these conditions suggest that moral responsibility is not merely about the causal control of actions but also about the agent's capacity for self-authored, rational, and evaluatively guided action, linking the normative ideal of autonomy directly to the ethical assessment of human conduct.

### **Joseph Raz's Account of Autonomy**

Joseph Raz offers one of the most influential modern accounts of autonomy, situating it as a normative and socially embedded capacity essential for personal well-being and moral

responsibility. Unlike purely procedural or individualistic accounts, Raz emphasizes that autonomy is both an intrinsic value and an instrumentally valuable capacity, enabling individuals to pursue lives they have reason to value (Raz, 1986; Shiffrin, 2014). For Raz, autonomy is not merely the absence of external interference; it requires specific conditions that make meaningful self-direction possible. These include the availability of worthwhile options, sufficient cognitive and evaluative capacities, and freedom from manipulation or coercion (Raz, 1986; Christman, 2012; Khader, 2011).

**Autonomy as Normative Capacity:** Raz conceives autonomy as a normative ideal, distinct from mere liberty. While freedom can be thought of as the absence of interference, autonomy requires that individuals are capable of shaping their lives according to rationally endorsed principles and valuable options. This conception aligns with his broader theory of value and authority, where the ability to make choices among objectively valuable alternatives constitutes the foundation of a self-directed life (Raz, 1986; Dworkin, 2011). Contemporary scholars, such as Christman note that Raz’s focus on normative capacities situates autonomy as both personal and relational: one is autonomous not only through internal reflection but also through access to social, institutional, and material conditions that enable self-governance.

**Conditions for Autonomy:** Raz identifies several necessary conditions for autonomy, which have been extensively discussed and refined in the recent literature:

- i. **Mental capacities:** The agent must possess sufficient cognitive and evaluative abilities to comprehend options, assess reasons, and make considered choices (Christman, 2012; Hill, 2011).
- ii. **Availability of worthwhile options:** Autonomy requires that the agent has access to a range of meaningful and valuable life paths, enabling choice in a practical and substantive sense (Raz, 1986; Khader, 2011).
- iii. **Freedom from coercion and manipulation:** For choices to be genuinely autonomous, the agent must not be compelled or manipulated into decisions that contradict their rational endorsement (Shiffrin, 2014; Oshana, 2015).

By emphasizing these conditions, Raz integrates a relational dimension into autonomy: the social and institutional environment can either facilitate or impede self-directed life planning. This marks a significant advance over more individualistic theories, which often neglect the structural conditions that shape autonomy (Khader, 2011; Oshana, 2015).

**Autonomy and Authority:** A distinctive feature of Raz’s framework is his “service conception of authority,” which holds that legitimate authority can enhance, rather than undermine, individual autonomy (Raz, 1986; Christman & Anderson, 2011). According to this conception, the function of authority is to guide individuals toward better choices than they might make unaided, without coercively replacing their judgment. By supporting access to valuable options and providing reasoned direction, authority can increase the agent’s capacity for autonomous decision-making. Contemporary theorists such as Shiffrin and Hill have emphasized that this approach reconciles autonomy with social and political embeddedness, demonstrating that freedom and responsibility are not purely private or isolated phenomena but require supportive social structures.

**Autonomy and Moral Responsibility in Raz:** Raz’s account of autonomy directly underpins moral responsibility. By specifying the conditions under which agents can exercise self-governance, Raz delineates the circumstances in which they can justifiably be held

accountable for their actions (Raz, 1986; Berofsky, 2012). Only those who possess the normative capacity for autonomous choice can be praised or blamed, as moral responsibility presupposes both rational deliberation and freedom from undue coercion (Christman, 2012; Fischer & Ravizza, 2010). This framework addresses both internal constraints such as impaired reasoning or conflicting desires and external constraints, including social oppression or institutional failures, situating moral responsibility in a realistic, socially aware context (Khader, 2011; Oshana, 2015). By combining normative theory, practical reasoning, and relational considerations, Raz's conception of autonomy offers a robust philosophical foundation for understanding moral responsibility. It preserves the centrality of personal freedom while recognizing the crucial role of social and institutional structures in enabling self-directed, morally responsible action. Contemporary scholarship has extended his insights, exploring applications in ethics, law, and civic theory, and showing that Raz's framework remains highly relevant for analyzing the conditions under which individuals can exercise agency and be held accountable (Shiffrin, 2014; Christman, 2012; Oshana, 2015).

**Autonomy and Moral Responsibility in Joseph Raz:** Joseph Raz's conception of autonomy is widely recognized as one of the most sophisticated frameworks in contemporary moral philosophy, offering a nuanced account of the conditions under which moral responsibility can be attributed. Raz's contribution lies in his ability to bridge the gap between individual self-governance and the normative structures of society, highlighting that autonomy is both a personal capacity and a socially facilitated ideal (Raz, 1986; Shiffrin, 2014).

- i. **Autonomy as a Prerequisite for Moral Responsibility:** For Raz, moral responsibility presupposes autonomy: only those agents capable of rational self-direction and evaluative endorsement of their actions can be held accountable for praise or blame (Christman, 2012; Berofsky, 2012). Moral responsibility is not merely a function of causality; it depends on whether the agent has exercised reasoned judgment, considered alternative courses of action, and acted according to principles they can reflectively endorse. This position aligns with Fischer and Ravizza's view that moral responsibility is inseparable from the capacity to control one's decisions in a meaningful way. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that this link has profound ethical significance. For instance, Christman argues that attributing moral responsibility to agents who lack autonomy risks misattribution of blame, undermining both justice and ethical evaluation. Shiffrin similarly notes that paternalistic interventions must consider whether they genuinely enhance autonomy or merely constrain it, as only agents whose autonomy is respected and facilitated can bear full moral responsibility.
- ii. **Internal and External Constraints:** Raz acknowledges that autonomy is often imperfect and constrained. Internal constraints may include psychological conditions, irrational desires, compulsions, or cognitive limitations, which can undermine the agent's capacity for authentic decision-making (Hill, 2011; Oshana, 2015). External constraints include coercive social structures, oppression, economic deprivation, or institutional failures that restrict access to valuable life options (Khader, 2011; Shiffrin, 2014). Crucially, Raz's framework integrates these realities: moral responsibility is context-sensitive. Agents whose autonomy is significantly limited whether internally or externally may have their responsibility mitigated, but the moral framework still evaluates the extent to which reasoned choice and self-authorship are present (Berofsky, 2012; Christman & Anderson, 2011). This relational perspective situates Raz's theory as an ethically realistic approach to responsibility, accommodating the complexities of human life without abandoning normative rigor.

- iii. **Social and Institutional Embeddedness of Autonomy:** A hallmark of Raz's theory is the recognition that autonomy is socially and institutionally mediated. Raz's "service conception of authority" asserts that legitimate authority can support autonomy by expanding agents' access to valuable and rationally chosen options, rather than undermining their self-direction (Raz, 1986; Shiffrin, 2014). For example, legal systems, educational institutions, and civic structures can enhance moral agency by guiding individuals toward informed, reflective, and socially responsible choices. Scholars like Oshana and Khader emphasize the contemporary relevance of this relational view. Autonomy is not solely a property of isolated rational agents; it is nurtured through social conditions, opportunities for deliberation, and access to resources. This perspective is particularly salient in discussions of structural injustice, where social inequalities constrain the practical realization of autonomy, thereby complicating assessments of moral responsibility.
- iv. **Ethical Pluralism and Value Selection:** Raz's account of autonomy also accommodates ethical pluralism. Rather than requiring agents to adopt a fixed set of moral values, autonomy involves the capacity to evaluate and choose among objectively valuable alternatives (Raz, 1986; Christman, 2012). This pluralistic approach respects diversity in moral and cultural reasoning while maintaining normative accountability: agents are responsible for choices they can rationally endorse, even when their values differ from those of others.

Recent literature highlights the significance of this pluralistic dimension. Khader notes that autonomy in diverse social contexts must balance freedom of choice with the requirement that agents engage critically with values, avoiding both paternalism and moral relativism. Shiffrin further argues that enabling autonomy within pluralistic societies requires institutional and legal safeguards that expand, rather than constrain, self-directed moral agency. While Raz's framework is widely respected, it has faced several critiques. Some argue that Raz's reliance on normative capacities risks overemphasizing idealized rationality, potentially marginalizing those whose autonomy is constrained by social, cognitive, or economic limitations (Khader, 2011; Oshana, 2015). Others contend that linking moral responsibility to autonomy may exclude vulnerable populations from ethical evaluation, raising questions about fairness and inclusion (Berofsky, 2012; Christman & Anderson, 2011). By linking autonomy with moral responsibility, Raz provides a comprehensive philosophical foundation that integrates normative rigor, practical realism, and social awareness. Contemporary scholarship continues to explore and extend his insights, confirming their enduring relevance in addressing questions of freedom, accountability, and ethical agency in complex societies (Christman, 2012; Khader, 2011; Shiffrin, 2014).

Raz's conception of autonomy is also notable for its compatibility with liberal pluralism. His framework allows for ethical and cultural diversity, as it emphasizes the capacity to choose among objectively valuable alternatives rather than imposing a single, universal set of values (Raz, 1986; Christman, 2012). This pluralistic orientation respects the diversity of individual and cultural values while maintaining normative standards for moral responsibility. Scholars such as Shiffrin argue that this aspect of Raz's theory is particularly relevant in modern liberal societies, where autonomy must be understood in relation to both individual freedom and social coexistence. By balancing normative rigor with respect for pluralism, Raz provides a flexible and inclusive account of moral responsibility, capable of addressing the complexities of diverse social contexts. In summary, Raz's account is philosophically robust and ethically nuanced because it:

- i. Establishes a clear and defensible link between autonomy and moral responsibility, clarifying conditions under which praise and blame are justified.
- ii. Recognizes the social and institutional enabling conditions necessary for autonomy, situating moral responsibility in a realistic, context-sensitive framework.
- iii. Respects ethical and cultural diversity, aligning with the principles of liberal pluralism while preserving the normative demands of moral responsibility.

These strengths underscore why Raz's theory remains a central reference point in contemporary debates on moral responsibility, autonomy, and agency. They also provide a solid foundation for applying his insights to legal theory, civic ethics, and moral education.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has provided a comprehensive examination of Joseph Raz's conception of autonomy and its profound implications for understanding moral responsibility. Raz presents autonomy as a normative capacity that transcends mere freedom from interference, emphasizing that genuine self-governance requires the ability to make reasoned, reflective, and evaluatively guided choices among objectively valuable options (Raz, 1986; Christman, 2012). In Raz's view, autonomy is inherently linked to moral responsibility: only agents capable of rational self-direction, who act freely and in accordance with principles they can endorse, can meaningfully bear praise or blame for their actions (Fischer & Ravizza, 2010; Berofsky, 2012). This establishes a clear conceptual connection between autonomy and ethical accountability, addressing longstanding debates in moral philosophy about the conditions under which individuals can justifiably be held responsible. A distinctive feature of Raz's framework is its attention to social and institutional enabling conditions. Autonomy is not an abstract, purely individualistic capacity; it is relational and context-dependent, nurtured by supportive social structures, educational opportunities, legal systems, and civic institutions (Shiffrin, 2014; Khader, 2011; Oshana, 2015). These structures enhance the agent's capacity to deliberate rationally, access valuable options, and make choices aligned with their reflective values. By incorporating these relational dimensions, Raz situates moral responsibility within the realities of human life, acknowledging that internal limitations (such as cognitive or psychological constraints) and external limitations (such as social oppression or structural inequalities) can influence the degree to which an agent can exercise responsible autonomy.

Raz's conception is also compatible with liberal pluralism, accommodating diverse moral, cultural, and personal values without compromising the normative demands of moral responsibility (Christman, 2012; Shiffrin, 2014). Autonomy, in Raz's framework, enables individuals to critically evaluate their choices among multiple ethically acceptable alternatives, thereby supporting moral diversity while maintaining accountability. This balance highlights that autonomy is both a personal ideal and a social necessity, essential for fostering ethical citizenship, civic engagement, and the legitimate exercise of authority in pluralistic societies. In conclusion, Raz's theory provides a comprehensive, socially grounded, and normatively robust framework for understanding moral responsibility. Autonomy is neither a purely individualistic aspiration nor a mere procedural capacity; it is a multidimensional concept, integrating rational reflection, evaluative judgment, and social enabling conditions. By linking autonomy with moral responsibility, Raz offers enduring insights for ethics, law, political philosophy, and education, demonstrating that the cultivation of autonomy is central to human dignity, accountable action, and the ethical functioning of society. Ultimately, Raz's framework shows that autonomy is simultaneously a

personal moral achievement and a societal imperative, providing a foundation for both ethical evaluation and social policy in contemporary pluralistic contexts.

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