The Journal of Mind and Behavior
Spring, 1983, Volume 4, Number 2
Pages 221-230
ISSN 0271-0137

Benefic Autonomy: Thomas More as Exemplar

Steven E. Salmony
The John Umstead Hospital
and
Richard Smoke
Peace and Common Security

With the aid of an image of an important historical figure, Thomas More, this paper sketches a concept of autonomy. Although benefic autonomy is distinguished from pathological forms of "autonomy," the discussion is not concerned with pathological personality types. Rather, what is generally regarded as exemplary character is focused upon here. The benefic autonomous personality, unusually free from inward and outward pressures, tends to look and find *within* the guidance and sustenance by which it lives. The paper suggests that Arendt's concepts of "thinking, judging, and willing" provide a useful conceptualization for benefic autonomy, and that benefic autonomy is usefully related to the ego ideal (as clearly distinguished from the superego). Evidence from More's life, personality and thought is brought forward in support of these propositions.

The nature and sources of autonomy have long seemed to the present authors to be one of the great questions in personality psychology, one that has engaged and re-engaged thinkers and writers for a long time. The immediate inspiration that led the authors to make some contribution to the subject came from the demonstrably clear image presented by Thomas More. He is not a fictional Superman (e.g., Goethe's Faust or Nietzsche's Übermensch), but a historical person who, even against great odds and ultimately at great cost, was outstandingly capable of acting on his own values and his own understanding of what is appropriate, correct, and true in life. Suffice it to say that he has seemed to be an especially vivid exemplar of autonomy developed to a high degree.

Obviously, a great man such as More is different from ordinary people in important ways. But close inspection of his work as well as biographies of More suggest that specific intellectual and psychical processes which make for a high order of autonomy in More's personality may be accessible to almost everyone to a significant degree. If this is so, then these structural aspects of personality organization might be identified theoretically and investigated empirically in other people.

This paper is based on a doctoral dissertation authored by Steven E. Salmony (Salmony, 1980). A portion of the theoretical investigation therein is summarized here, but supportive empirical research is not. The outlines of Thomas More's life are well known and historical references are not included here. Requests for reprints should be sent to Steven E. Salmony, Ph.D., Adult Admissions Unit, The John Umstead Hospital, Butner, North Carolina 27509.

More's autonomy appears to be anchored in a capacity to adhere to a configuration of internalized images and ideas of the self, even in the face of extraordinary pressures. To maintain this allegiance, he risked confrontation with a king who potentially held More's life in his hands and who perceived More as threatening to his self-interests. More's "respected peers" then colluded with Henry VIII and chided More as being stubborn and ridiculous for not conforming to the contrived logic and conventional wisdom to which they all declared allegiance so that the King's interest would be realized. More was socially ostracized via imprisonment and, refusing to bend the knee to threats, ultimately was executed. It seems clear that individuals who can successfully cope with such derisive and threatening forms of pressure as More faced, must in the course of their development have created a highly valued internal image of whom and what they want to be. Evidently, this image of their potentiality serves as an inner presence that guides and supports their actions even, if necessary, to a point of defying a consensually validated, social construction of reality, when that world is at odds with their sense of what is true and right.

Philosophers, theologians, and others both before and since More's time have praised this quality and have suggested a variety of sources from which it can spring: a capacity to comprehend the meaning of events deeply, an abiding faith in God, and other possible sources. Many explanations for it have been offered over the centuries. However, the development of psychology and especially depth psychology, in the twentieth century has brought an entirely new perspective to the issue. It has become possible to consider this capacity in functional relationship to other elements or processes within the psyche rather than to comprehend it merely in abstract or spiritual terms.

Some of the ways in which autonomy has been approached by psychologists in the last half century are in terms of "self-actualization" (Maslow, 1954), "open-mindedness" (Rokeach, 1960), "personal causality" (Heider, 1958), and as "individuation" (Fromm, 1941, 1947). A notably large number of psychologists have seemed to view autonomy as somehow tripartite in its aspects: "ideas, values, and actions" (Sanford, 1966), "reception, evaluation, and action" (Rokeach, 1960), "ideas, values, and practice" (Benne, 1977). The similarity of these notions is striking. In all cases, there is an intellectual, an evaluative, and a practical element.

However, none of these authors explores these concepts with as much rigor as does Hannah Arendt (1978) in her carefully developed conceptualization of what she terms "thinking, judging, and willing." Arendt's concepts deserve careful attention because of the striking way they parallel many observers' notions of the tripartite quality of autonomy, because of her great care in defining and developing them, and because it seems evident that autonomy in some deep way involves the functioning of intellect—Arendt's subject.

Arendt states that *thinking* "means to think for oneself . . . disregarding

what we usually call self-interest and which according to Kant is not enlightened . . . but is in fact limiting" (p. 258). Thus, an intellectual consciousness is required which enables the individual to move to an impartial viewpoint beyond the demands of self and the expectations of others. Noy's (1979) explication of a theory of autonomous thought lends support to Arendt's notions. He contends that thought succeeds "in becoming disengaged from the traditional subordination of the self to its needs" (p. 199). That is, thought can be "autonomous, not subjected to any master. Its capacity to orient itself toward reality, to categorize, to represent, and to discern causal connections, regularities, and rules determining reality events stems from the fact that it is not subjected to reality, so that reality cannot dictate the forms and strategies (thought) will use" (p. 199). In a similar position to that of Rokeach (1960), Noy holds that the maintenance of autonomous thought requires continual striving against inner and outer forces which close the mind and which produce self-centered or obligatory thought, rather than creating an open, "dynamic state in which the boundaries between the two systems may shift back and forth according to the strength of the various forces involved" (pp. 208-209) and in which the autonomous mental processes are dominant.

When examining the concept of *judging*, it should be noted that this particular criterion was not fully developed at the time of the author's death. Arendt's conception of judging assumes a faculty which enables one to evaluate "as a spectator," and to experience "the effect of reflection upon the mind" (pp. 263 and 269). Thus defined, judging requires an "interest in disinterestedness" (p. 270) and is a process of "discriminating right and wrong" (p. 263) as distinguished from matters of taste. Although Arendt maintains that moral judgments are subject to the rule of reason and matters of taste or preference are not, this assertion is not in agreement with research on judgment. The more general view holds that the psychological process is similar for choices (preferences) and judgments. It is clear that in all cases there is reference to some standard. It may be implicit as in the case of well-established preferences or explicit as in the case of a psychophysical task where a subject is being asked to differentiate among a number of stimuli or of a perceptual task such as Asch (1956) presented in his classical study of independence versus conformity of judgment, with the general conclusion being that variation in the judgmental task is greater than the variation of the judgmental process (Bock and Jones, 1968; Eiser and Stroebe, 1972).

No aspect of mental life has been the subject of more discussion and debate than *willing* (Arendt, 1978). Although the colloquies continue concerning the old philosophical problem of free will versus determinism (Arendt, 1978; Berlin, 1958; de Charms, 1968, 1979; Erikson, 1950, 1964; Fromm, 1941; May, 1969; Parent, 1974; Ryle, 1949), these investigators agree with Arendt that a capacity for intentional, planful self-direction does exist and is a "spring of action, that is, a power of spontaneously beginning a series of successive

things or states . . . the actualization of the principium individuationis" (pp. 6-7). Willing involves the freedom to choose from among possibilities and thus the experience of active control and personal choice are usually presented as evidence of a willing faculty. In other words, this faculty is thought of as that which is appropriate to forming projects and choosing among possible courses of action.

As outlined by Erikson (1950), the capacity for volitional control and action evidently begins in early childhood and extends through the numerous phases and stages of development. May (1969) provides useful ideas about this developmental process, the source of which he identifies as intentionality. In general, intentionality emerges in infancy as a capacity or structure which eventually gives meaning to experience and which evolves from action that is passive, reactive, instinctive, reflexive, and immediate into competent action, achievements, and other outward confirmations of freedom of motion, self-direction, and self-realization all regularly associated with adult living.

Here we suggest simply that "benefic autonomy," as we term it, may be usefully approached in these terms. We assert that benefic autonomy may be conceived as an outcome, probably a necessary outcome, of "thinking, judging, and willing" processes, suitably integrated and refined. That is, when thinking, judging, and willing have been raised to a high order, approaching their full form and function as Arendt defines them, the outcome will be a personality structure that is highly autonomous in the positive and true sense of the term.

It is suggestive in this context that these three processes are notably deficient (at least in comparison to Arendt's conception of them) in the pathological forms of "autonomy," some of which are sometimes confused with real autonomy. Sociopathic and anomic personalities types reveal noticeable difficulties in their thinking, judging, and willing processes; psychotic individuals, of course, display more drastic disorders. Even the alienated individual who remains isolated in the midst of society, and who is sometimes misperceived by self and others as highly autonomous, reveals imbalances and a lack of integration in thought, judgment, and will.[1]

By contrast, the true or benefic autonomous personality has the ability to synthesize the thinking, judging, and willing faculties into a capacity for active mastery of oneself and the environment. Thinking, judging, and willing functions, so synthesized, form an "executive" faculty which can (but when weak, often does not) harmoniously coordinate all other aspects of personality. In this sense, these synthesized functions form a relatively independent

[1]Our focus upon the intellectual and psychical processes in More's personality has served in a way to limit the scope of this presentation. In this context, our sole purpose has been to explore autonomy as exemplified in the life of Thomas More. Consideration and investigation of personalities (e.g., Adolph Hitler, Hideki Tojo, Nyguyen Cao Ky, and Idi Amin) with seemingly pathological forms of "autonomy" have been deferred to future projects.

structure in personality which is related to, but not dominated by, primary needs, momentary inclinations, and social interests. Our emphasis on thinking, judging, and willing is not meant to suggest that individuals with a capacity for benefic autonomy are not emotional, self-interested people who are spontaneous and who are capable and desirous of meeting their needs. Clearly, personal needs and social interests are aspects of all balanced personalities. In benefic autonomous persons, passions, urges, inclinations, and interests are experienced, but these manifestations can be and usually are harmoniously blended, or if necessary blunted, by the capacity for autonomy.

We believe that Thomas More represents an especially suitable exemplar of the benefic autonomous personality in at least two ways. First, even casual acquaintance with his life and personality sheds much light on the difference between benefic autonomy and the false forms of "autonomy" evidenced by pathological, anomic, and alienated personalities. Though capable of self-mastery to an extraordinary degree, More was very much a "man for all seasons" (Bolt, 1960) who richly enjoyed his family, friends, and social life, and who participated in his community in a warm and outgoing fashion. Second, when circumstances compelled More to prove the depth of his autonomy, he did so in a way that clearly demonstrated his refined capacity for thinking, judging, and willing. He did not seek or welcome confrontation, drama, or drastic action; these things were forced upon him. He did not take a stance in a spirit of defiance, nor from that shallow form of willfulness that says, in effect, "I am doing this because *I* feel like it." Instead, he arrived at his position through much soul-searching and through conscious reasoning and decision. His thinking was careful, his judgment of the issues was based on explicit, deeply-pondered standards and convictions, and his will was completely determined to follow through his thought and convictions to an integrated conclusion, and then to action consistent with it. His thinking, judging, and willing all led him to recognize that the existence of factors extraneous to the issues at stake—such as the opinions of his peers—*were* extraneous. It is his ability to maintain this position—even in the face of the most dire threats—that his greatness is remembered.

Much more could be said about this conception of benefic autonomy, but a full-scale assessment of the utility of conceptualizing autonomy in this tripartite way must await future investigation. However, we do want to comment on a related theoretical aspect: the relationship between benefic autonomy and other elements in the psyche. There may be more than one element or process within the psyche by which the thinking, judging, and willing faculties may be integrated to form and function as a relatively independent, internally consistent structure in personality, but the psychoanalytic tradition offers one very clear possibility: the ego ideal.

The ego ideal is a psychic agency, an internalized image of potentiality, by which individuals measure themselves and all their activities (Freud, 1914).

Freud's description of the ego ideal reveals a psychic agency that is separate from the superego. Indeed, the contents of the ego ideal are apparently gained over the course of the life cycle and include impressions of people, values, and ideas, all of which comprise what we shall term an individual's "accrued inheritance." For our purposes, the impressions which comprise a person's accrued inheritance are gathered mainly from individuals (but not primarily parents or parent surrogates), fictional characters, and historical figures who are deeply admired and regarded as significant others, after the structure of the superego has crystallized. This formulation of accrued inheritance takes into account Erikson's (1950) insights that "a sense of ideal identity" is connected, not primarily to one's biological father and mother, but to "the way of my forefathers" and foremothers (p. 113), and that individuals "are ever ready to install lasting idols and ideals as guardians of a final identity" (p. 228). In other words, the well-developed ego ideal is comprised of personified qualities and ideals actively formulated from one's accrued inheritance and not mainly from icons, cliches, and rationalizations unreflectively and passively received from one's parents or, at later stages of development, from parent surrogates.

A number of psychoanalytic theorists (Jacobson, 1954; Novey, 1955; Nunberg, 1932; Piers and Singer, 1953; Reich, 1954, 1960) have suggested that Freud's subsequent writing (1923, 1933) about the formation and function of the ego ideal seems to have confused the conceptualization of it. Lampl-de Groot (1962) agrees with this position and suggests that a return to the 1914 formulation would clarify the confusion by restoring the ego ideal to its status as a separate psychic agency within an ego—ego ideal—superego system. In contrast to the superego, which crystallizes early and consists primarily of mental representations of the original parents as authorities, the ego ideal develops later and is formed through a process of identifying and collecting aspects of deeply admired others and taking these personified qualities and principles into oneself to produce a fused image. Whereas, the superego maintains an essentially negative and authoritarian posture vis-a-vis the intellectual faculties, the posture of the ego ideal is quite different: to the extent that it is well developed and at least partially conscious it offers these faculties a positive image of what one wants to be.

Briefly stated, Lampl-de Groot (1962) theorizes that the ego ideal is formed out of the experience of a normally nurtured child first having to fend for itself. In other words, when an empathic mother's ability to provide a constantly appropriate environment is temporarily exceeded, the child has a need which goes unattended. The child copes with such moments in the only way possible—through wishes which are composed of feelings (i.e., libidinal and aggressive impulses) and forms (i.e., images of the desired object). In Lampl-de Groot's words, "when the mother is not instantly available, the infant takes refuge in 'hallucinatory wish fulfillment,' as Freud called it in earlier times" (p.

96). This primitive response of an infantile ego to deprivation and frustration provides the primary experience out of which the ego ideal develops. Following this first stage, there are three additional stages identified by Lampl-de Groot, the last occurring throughout much of later childhood and adolescence and being concerned primarily with the formation of ethics and ideals. Clearly, the development of the ego ideal is a complicated and lengthy process which, with a positive outcome, can result in individuals who look within themselves for guiding principles and personified qualities by which to live. In the ego ideal's mature form, it is an affectively supportive, rationally adequate, and ethically effective agency that prevails over the introjections of the more primitive and punitive superego, superseding it as the guide of the executive mental faculties.[2]

We posit that the image presented by the ego ideal guides, motivates, and sustains the psyche's capacity for constructive thinking, judging, and willing. Analytically, the ego ideal, especially to the extent that it is conscious, represents an "energy source" upon which the psyche can draw. Hence, in the increasingly autonomous person the thinking-judging-willing functions can detach partially from the compelling needs and socialized interests of the self, and yet be supported and influenced by a positive inner presence. The benefic autonomous personality can afford, as it were, to be autonomous because it has developed a nurturing inner presence that diminishes the need for ongoing support from others. Hence, such people can more readily think, judge, and will for themselves.

Benefic autonomy, it is supposed, means a growing freedom from both external and internal pressures on the psyche. Demands made by society or other persons, and needs felt within oneself, are observed and weighed but, to the degree the psyche is autonomous, they do not momentarily swamp or virtually enslave the capacities for thinking, judging, and willing. The psyche may, and often does, choose to meet the demand or need; but it is also free, as More clearly demonstrated, to pursue a higher goal and to accomplish remarkable feats without external pressures or internal needs making this psychologically impossible. An active adherence to what one knows and wills appears to become a psychological possibility, at least in part, because of the cognitive and affective support provided by a mature ego ideal.

In More's case, his ego ideal appears to have the essential structure and substance of Christian humanism, as propounded by his closest friend, Desiderius Erasmus. It appears that the lessons More learned from Erasmus

[2]Other social scientists have sought to distinguish between superego-dominated conscience and ego ideal-dominated conscience. Allport (1955) makes a distinction between a "must" conscience and an "ought" conscience. Fromm (1941, 1947) distinguished the "authoritarian," security-seeking conscience from the "humanistic," self-satisfying conscience. Bertocci and Millard (1963) draw a similar distinction between an "automatic" conscience and an "autonomous" conscience. Also, Sheehy (1974) recognized this difference in a Janus-like, two-faced image of conscience which is comprised of a "dictator" side and a "guardian" side.

on the meaning of a Christian life inverted the conventional doctrines of Aquinas, which pervaded fifteenth and sixteenth century religious thought in England. Apparently, More came to regard Thomist philosophy as embodying a construction of reality which promoted an outrageous parody of Christian living. The meanings More derived from Christian humanism and internalized as an ego ideal drew him, not to systematic theology and elaborately-justified social conventions, but to religious sensibility as a variety of ongoing personal experience. Doctrine was de-emphasized for a sense of living presence or spirit. In Erasmus's and More's view, living in the Christian spirit meant living, insofar as possible, in the likeness of Christ. This image gradually took on increasing richness of meaning as More strove to embody elements of that likeness. Eventually, this ego ideal developed into so dominant an inner presence that More's psyche could sustain a demonstration of autonomy compelling enough that it is still celebrated today.

This example suggests that as the ego ideal becomes higher and more ambitious at some relatively late stage along the developmental path, the psyche may become so deeply nurtured and influenced by the ego ideal that it becomes a supreme end in itself, dominating all other psychodynamics, even generalized aims and basic impulses such as love of family and biological self-preservation. Such instances are indeed rare. They deserve our special notice, however, for the light they may shed on dynamics that are more obscured (but not necessarily absent or insignificant) in more ordinary personalities. Here then, is another reason why it may be advantageous to study Thomas More as an exemplar of the autonomous personality.

Autonomy, we note in conclusion, is a topic that has drawn the attention of generations of psychologists, and yet one about which relatively little is understood. Our argument has suggested that the quality of being unusually free from inner and outer pressures and influences may have origins that are not unusual at all. However exceptional a Thomas More may have been in the degree of his autonomy, the roots of it may lie in psychological processes that are more dimly familiar to everyone. Thinking, judging, and willing are hardly strange, though they are not very integrated in the average personality. The ego ideal is hardly an oddity, though contemporary Western culture makes little effort to develop it. Perhaps as psychology comes better to understand the origins and dynamics of benefic autonomy, its benefits can be more widely appreciated and shared.

References

Allport, G.W. *Becoming.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955.

Arendt, H. *The life of the mind, volume two: Willing.* New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978.

Asch, S.E. Studies of independence and conformity: 1. A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied,* 1956, *70* (Entire No. 416).

Benne, K. Preface. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences*, 1977, *13*, 3.
Berlin, I. *Two concepts of liberty.* Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1958.
Berlin, I. *Four essays on liberty.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1969.
Bertocci, P.A., and Millard, R.M. *Personality and the good.* New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1963.
Bock, R.D., and Jones, L.V. *The measurement of prediction and choice.* San Francisco: Holden-Day, 1968.
Bolt, R. *A man for all seasons.* New York: Random House, 1960.
de Charms, R. *Personal causation: The internal affective determinants of behavior.* New York: Academic Press, 1968.
Eiser, Jr., R., and Stroebe, W. *Categorization and social judgment.* London, England: Academic Press, 1972.
Erikson, E.H. *Childhood and society.* New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1950.
Erikson, E.H. *Insight and responsibility.* New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1964.
Freud, S. Three essays on the theory of sexuality. *Standard Edition* (Volume 7). London, England: Hogarth Press, 1953, 125-245. (Originally published in 1905.)
Freud, S. On narcissism. *Standard Edition* (Volume 14). London, England: Hogarth Press, 1957, 67-102. (Originally published in 1914.)
Fromm, E. *Escape from freedom.* New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston Publishers, 1969. (Originally published in 1941.)
Fromm, E. *Man for himself.* New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston Publishers, 1947.
Heider, F. *The psychology of interpersonal relations.* New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1958.
Jacobson, E. The self and the object world: Vicissitudes of their infantile cathexes and their influence on ideational and affective development. *Psychoanalytic Study of Child*, 1954, *9*, 75-127.
Lampl-de Groot, J. Ego ideal and the superego. *Psychoanalytic Study of Child*, 1962, *17*, 94-106.
Maslow, A.H. *Motivation and personality.* New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1970. (Originally published in 1954.)
May, R. *Love and will.* New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1969.
Novey, S. The role of the superego and the ego ideal in character formation. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 1955, *36*, 254-259.
Noy, P. Analytic theory of cognitive development. *Psychoanalytic Study of Child*, 1979, *34*, 169-216.
Nunberg, H. *Principles of psychoanalysis.* New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1955. (Originally published in 1932.)
Parent, W. Some recent work on the concept of liberty. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1974, *11*, 149-167.
Piers, G., and Singer, M.B. *Shame and guilt.* Springfield, Illinois: Thomas, 1953.
Reich, A. Pathological forms of self-esteem regulation. *Psychoanalytic Study of Child*, 1960, *15*, 215-232.
Rokeach, M. *The open and closed mind.* New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1960.
Salmony, S.E. Benefic autonomy and its relationship to the ego ideal. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Wright Institute, Berkeley, 1980.
Sanford, N. *Self and society: Social change and individual development.* New York: Atherton Press, 1966.
Sheehy, G. *Passages.* New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1974.