Autonomy at work

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis certification</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis objectives</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the method used in the thesis</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the structure of this thesis</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisions to the thesis</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What Is Autonomy?</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Frankfurt theory of autonomy</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The issues Frankfurt's account of autonomy must answer</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation of Frankfurt's theory</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The challenge of wantons</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification and decisive identification</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring about desires</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volitional necessity</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction and identification</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulated desires, autonomous actions, and duress.</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherence for autonomy</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dworkin's theory of autonomy</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and autonomy</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extending Frankfurt's and Dworkin's insights into autonomy</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Taylor approach to autonomy</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of self-evaluations: the role of practical reason</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Requirements for critical appraisal 58
Self-understanding 59
Communication and relationships 60
Truth and others 61
Value and self correction 62
Competency 63
Requirements for full autonomy 64
Self-knowledge 65
Self-correction 65
Ability to respond to threats to autonomy 67
Care 67
Possible criticism of the requirements for autonomy 68
Methodological Issues 71
What account of autonomy is being advocated in this thesis? 71
Foucault’s insights for autonomy 81
The Importance of social aspects of autonomy 86
Work, relational autonomy and Foucault’s theories 87

Chapter 3 93

The value of autonomy 93
Introduction 93
Values and autonomy 93
Values and persons 94
Values and autonomy 95
How does autonomy promote values? 96
Tension in ideas about autonomy and value 97
Concerns about the arbitrariness of values within autonomy 99
Good values 100
Revising the good 101
Egalitarian values and autonomy 103
Validation of egalitarian concerns about work 104
Value of full autonomy
The benefits of full autonomy
Conclusions

Chapter 3

Autonomy and scientific management

Introduction
Background to the development of scientific management
Features of scientific management
What was the impact of scientific management on workers?
Scientific management and deskilling
Problems with the Braverman account of deskilling
Implications of scientific management for autonomy
Seperation of conception and execution
Specialisation
Pacing and scheduling
One right way
Training development/information
Work process organised by management
Quotas measurement and control

Chapter 4

Management by objectives

Introduction
MBO and new management control
MBO business plans and control
Market legitimacy for management control
Features of MBO
MBO and self-control
Harmonisation and rewards
MBO discipline and self-control
Culture and self-control 142
Disciplinary techniques and MBO 143
Confession and MBO 144
Surveillance 146
Surveillance in the workplace 147
Cost accounting and normalising judgement 148
Normalisation 152
Critique of MBO 153
MBO and autonomy supporting conditions 155
MBO and critical appraisal 157
MBO and threats to autonomy 158
MBO and the motivation to be autonomous 158

**Chapter 5**

**The management theory of Simon** 161

Introduction 161
The Simon theory of management decision making 161
Bounded Rationality 161
Satisficing 162
Procedural rationality 164
Presenting organisations as a response to bounded rationality 164
Decision making within organisations 165
Achieving control by authority 166
Zone of acceptance 167
Docility 167
Use of rules for decision making 168
Critique of Simon's theory 168
Autonomy and Simon's theory 170
Supporting conditions 172
## Chapter 6

**Supporting autonomy at work**

- Recruitment practices and autonomy 173
- Encouraging autonomy by empowerment 175
- Control in Australian workplaces 178
- Autonomy in Semco 179
- Has Semco encouraged autonomy? 180
- Context for increasing autonomy at work 182
- Relationships 182
- Language 183
- Participation and decision making 184
- Encouraging autonomy via dialogue 185
- Barriers to implementing dialogue 187
- Conclusions 190
- Endnotes 192

**Bibliography** 206
Chapter 2

Methodological Issues
The Importance of social aspects of autonomy
Work, relational autonomy and Foucault’s theories

Chapter 3

The value of autonomy
Introduction
Values and autonomy
Values and persons
Values and autonomy
How does autonomy promote values?
Tension in ideas about autonomy and value
Concerns about the arbitrariness of values within autonomy
Good values
Revising the good
Egalitarian values and autonomy
Validation of egalitarian concerns about work
Value of full autonomy
The benefits of full autonomy
Conclusions
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There are also countless persons over the years I spoke to about work and work practices during the compilation of this thesis. I also need to acknowledge their contribution.

Thesis certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

.............................................................

Signature: (Paul James)
Introduction

Background

There is a considerable body of writing about work.¹ A major theme of this writing is personal dissatisfaction, as exemplified by the term working class blues. As Studs Terkel in his book Working argues, work is one, if not the major, cause of economic unfreedom, physical debasement, personal alienation, and social ennui. He writes:

Work is, by its very nature, about violence to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents. It is above all (or beneath all) about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of workers.²

Terkel is not alone in this view. In well over one hundred studies in the last twenty-five years, workers have regularly depicted their jobs as physically exhausting, boring, psychologically diminishing, or personally humiliating and unimportant.³ Given that the bulk of the adult population spends more than a third of its waking hours at work,⁴ it may be concluded that work has a significant impact on persons. Yet, since Karl Marx, there has been scant or almost no philosophical investigation of work. This thesis arose from the desire to improve our understanding of the impact of work on persons.

Thesis objectives

In this thesis, I develop a philosophical account of autonomy that I apply to three major management theories and assess their support for autonomy. These are:

- Frederick Taylor’s, scientific management:
- Peter Drucker’s management by objectives (MBO); and
- Herbert Simon’s management decision-making.

These theories were selected as representative of major approaches to the management of work. Each of these theories had a major impact on work practices and was widely reported in management literature.

Having autonomy, as will be shown, demands a lot from us and our environment. Autonomy therefore provides a powerful lens to reveal the features and consequences of the selected management practices on persons. In addition, autonomy is of value in itself, and the degree to which management practices support autonomy can also be considered important.
Limitations of the method used in the thesis

Chapters 3 to 5 explore management theories in terms of the account of autonomy that is developed previously. It is recognised that a management theory may not always be applied as intended by its originating theorists, it may be cherry-picked, distorted and combined with other theories. There is almost no research that examines how management theories are applied in organisations. As a result, it is recognised that the findings of this thesis are primarily theoretical.

Overview of the structure of this thesis

Revisions to the thesis

This is a revised thesis. The thesis has been edited extensively. The major changes that have been made are outlined as follows. Chapters 1 and 2 have been replaced completely, also almost all of chapter 4 contains new material. Chapter 1 focuses on providing a more detailed account of autonomy and, in particular, the strengths and weaknesses of Frankfurt's and Dworkin's account of autonomy, and on explaining how their accounts can be extended to provide a more robust theory of autonomy.

The revised thesis often makes reference to a single person and refers to their actions. In this context the word there is singular as it refers to a man or a woman not man and a woman. This avoids the cumbersome use of s/he.

The suggestion to rewrite the material about Semco has not been taken up. The reason for this is that there is insufficient information provided in his account to show with any greater clarity how his management practices enhance autonomy at work. Further investigation and consideration has however, been made on what may help enhance autonomy in the workplace. A new section in chapter 6 investigates the role that dialogue could play in promoting autonomy at work. The thesis objectives are progressed in the following chapters.

Chapter 1: What is Autonomy

This chapter explores the question what is autonomy and in particular what are the main questions an account of autonomy needs to answer. It does this by examining the theories of Harry Frankfurt, Gerald Dworkin and Charles Taylor. The aim of this chapter is to identify what is required for a person to be fully autonomous.
Chapter 2: The Value of Autonomy

In this chapter I examine the question of what is the value of autonomy. Autonomy can take different forms, and can be understood in different ways not all of which may have the same value. I consider some ways in which autonomy may promote what has been termed the good life. This chapter is important for it helps identify what forms of autonomy that might be promoted in the workplace have value, that may contribute to the good life for a person.

Chapter 3: Scientific management

This chapter focuses on Frederick Taylor in developing his groundbreaking management theory scientific management. It begins by exploring the issues that scientific management were designed to solve. Then the major elements and features of scientific management are identified and examined. Henry Braverman's theory about scientific management causing deskilling is then considered. Braverman’s theory is shown to have some merit in identifying important aspects of scientific management. Finally, each principal feature of scientific management are assessed against the theory of autonomy established in chapter 1.

Chapter 4: The management theory of Herbert Simon

In this chapter, I examine the management decision-making theory of Herbert Simon. Simon's overriding aim was to produce a superior form of management decision-making. He argues that for workers autonomy is unnecessary and is, indeed, unhelpful in the workplace. The implications of Simon's position are illuminated in terms of the issues raised by the account of autonomy.

Chapter 5: Management by objectives (MBO)

This chapter examines Drucker's theory of management by objectives (MBO). The background to the development of MBO is also outlined. Drucker considers autonomy important and attempts to support it. Each of the principal features of Drucker's theory of management is assessed against the account of autonomy established in chapter 1.

Chapter 6: Supporting autonomy at work

In this final chapter, I examine what a workplace that supports autonomy would be like. I identify the requirements for such a workplace to be successfully achieved. In
this investigation, I consider the role of recruitment practices. I also investigate whether the contemporary management theory of empowerment may support autonomy. I consider Ricardo Semler's management reforms of Semco in terms of their possible contribution to autonomy. Finally I consider the potential benefits of dialogue in promoting autonomy at work.

Conclusions

In the conclusions, I consider the overall implications of all the management practices discussed in terms of their effect on autonomy and persons. I also raise some of the factors and issues that appear to significantly shape persons at work.