You're the Boss of You

Food and Talk, Fall 2025, Dr. Chuck Goldhaber

I. Autonomy

I'm going to argue that you are **autonomous**.

What does that mean? Let's look at the Greek roots: '*auto*' = self; '*nomos*' = law.
Literally, if you are autonomous, you give a law to yourself.
That means, roughly, that you act *because* you represent your action as the *right* thing to do, as something you *should* do.

I'll argue for my thesis in two stages:

(1) *First-personal*: You represent your actions this way when you're deliberating.

(2) *Inter-personal*: You have to take other people to be autonomous in order to view their actions as morally assessable.

II. Deliberation

Next, I'll argue that, for a significant amount of the things you do, you do them because you think you *should* do them.
In fact, you wouldn't have done them at all, if you didn't think you *should* do them.

Now, this is not true for all the things you do. Human actions can be:

1. *reflexive/unintentional*, like kicking when the doctor taps your knee.

2. *done on autopilot/from mere habit*, like turning left on your way home.

3. *deliberate/consciously chosen*, like telling someone carefully-worded bad news.

Let's focus on type-(3) actions—the actions you do as a result of *deliberation*.

When you deliberate, you face multiple options that you have to decide between.
What you're deciding about is which option would be the best—which you *should* do.

> **Example**. Your friend Sonya has a rough patch. Her appendix burst during finals. Now she has to take a make-up exam before her lease ends. She asks if you can help by telling her just a few study questions that did *not* appear on the exam.

What should you do? Tell her or not? Break the honor code or disappoint your friend?

Whatever you choose, you do this and not the opposite, *because* you see it as *right*.
And that just means you do what you chose to do in this case **autonomously**.

III. Moral assessment

When you assess the *moral worth* of other's actions, you don't just care about *what* actions were performed, but also but *why* they were performed.

Example: You fall off your bicycle, spraining your wrist badly.
Mary helps you to your feet, fixes the chain on your bike, and calms you down.

You'd likely say that Mary acted *kindly*—that her action had moral worth.
It certainly would if she helped you for its own sake, because she saw this was *right*.

But what if she has *ulterior motives*?
If she helped you only because she wanted to be owed a favor, or to look good for her political campaign, or to rob you, her action would have less or no moral worth.

Take-home: Mary's motive matters for your assessment of her action.

If someone's motives matter to the moral assessment of their actions, then you need to treat them as generally able to act according to their motives.
That means they act either because they think they *should* do this action, or because they think they *should* pursue some further aim. Either way, they act **autonomously**.

IV. Lingering concerns?

1. **Determinism**: Wait, aren't your actions deterministic—totally settled by genetics and past experience, or past states of the universe plus the laws of physics?

   → *Reply*: Even if the universe is deterministic, you could still act *because* you represent your action as right. So, you'd still be acting autonomously.
   And, anyway, we must treat ourselves as free to choose any option while we deliberate. We can't just *wait* for genes or physics to take charge!
   As Sartre says: We are condemned to be free.

2. **Self-deception**: Can't you sometimes act on different motives than you take yourself to? If so, do you know enough about your own motives to really know when you're acting autonomously?

   → *Reply*: This *is* possible, but why take it to be widespread? The fact that you can often explain your choices in detail after deliberating counts against it.

3. **Ambiguous agents**: Do you ever really know the motives of others—or that others even have motives at all? What if they're just robots? Or illusions!?

   → *Reply*: All I said was that *when* you assess the moral worth of actions, you have to view those whose actions you're assessing as having acted autonomously.
   It could be that your moral assessment really is misplaced in some cases.
   But it's not like you can just give up morally assessing our fellow humans' actions.
   Whether you can/should assess things animals or LLMs do is another question!