
Review

The autonomous animal: Self-governance and the modern subject

Claire E. Rasmussen

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2011, xvi + 210pp., ISBN: 978-0816669578

Contemporary Political Theory (2013) **12**, e12–e14. doi:10.1057/cpt.2012.10

Rasmussen's book sets out to deepen our understanding of the complex philosophical issue of autonomy, analysing the concept from a post-foundationalist perspective. Rather than develop a theory about the meaning of autonomy, her aim is to explore how autonomy is experienced in political, social and daily life. This work deals with a number of key questions about the relationship between autonomy and political philosophy, such as: how does our understanding of the concept of autonomy determine the parameters of legitimate political authority and interference?

Rasmussen explores how our definitions and interpretations of autonomy have significant political consequences. She notes that 'the normative ideal of individual autonomy introduced a profound shift in thinking about human subjectivity and good government' (p. xi); thus, it was through the development of the idea of individual autonomy that particular (for example, liberal) political goals were justified. Her primary focus is to explore how the concept of autonomy is constructed and deployed, and how this politicizes both the concept of the self, and the regulation of the self. Rasmussen's central conclusion is that autonomy is critical to everyday life because it politicizes the body of the self, by determining whether one is deemed to be autonomous or not. For instance, a drug-user can be classified as not being autonomous; consequently, his or her body can be subjected to medical and juridical intervention. Similarly, as teenage girls do not have autonomy over their own sexual agency, they cannot consent to sex, and this has led to the creation of rape laws (pp. 167–170).

Equally important to Rasmussen is the idea that autonomy is not merely the practice of self-government; it is, also, self-limitation (p. 2). This is explored in the empirical chapters of Rasmussen's work explains how autonomy is both regulation to a law, and a practice of creativity, a creating of the self. For instance, in Chapter 5, Rasmussen discusses the tension between the law,

whereby one regulates oneself to cultivate a ‘fit, healthy’ body, and creativity, whereby an athlete strives toward physical perfection.

Both the Introduction and the first chapter of the book provide an excellent introduction to some of the central features of liberal and post-foundationalist thought, as well as to the debates and discussions between them. Specifically, Rasmussen focuses on how the concept of autonomy is theorized in liberal and post-foundationalist thought, and the political consequences of these ways of theorizing about autonomy. Each of the following four chapters examines a case study of a particular practice of autonomy: youth, drugs, animals and fitness/health, respectively. One of the strengths of focusing on these four cases is that it allows Rasmussen to consider each in depth and in a detailed manner. A further strength of this book is that each of these chapters is self-contained.

However, one of the weaknesses of the book is that the case studies do not always focus consistently enough on the central concept of autonomy to provide coherence to the overall work. In particular, Chapter 4’s discussion of animals focuses on the relationship between humans and animals and the concept of ‘otherness’, but the links between this discussion and autonomy are not sufficiently clear. The concept of autonomy is restored in Chapter 5 and the short conclusion, as it is here that Rasmussen fully develops her idea that the concept of autonomy involves a relationship between the regulation of the self in relation to a law, and a practice of self-creativity.

Rasmussen’s project is one that I am particularly sympathetic toward, as she does not want to merely critique liberal thought and ideas about the self and autonomy, but instead wants to illustrate their limitations through post-foundationalist thinking. She also wants to make a case for retaining the idea of autonomy but with the caveat that we are aware of its political deployment. Ultimately, she concludes that the self is not merely subject to power and a law, but that autonomy involves creativity in response to a law. She argues that ‘the characterization of the subject as subjectification is not a surrender of the self to relationships of power but a call to be self-critical, attentive to the ways in which the self is always constructed with a given context and cognizant of the fact that these relationships could be changed’ (p. 170).

Rasmussen is therefore not attempting to remove the self from a central location in politics; instead her work explores how the concept of the autonomous self is deployed. She insists that the self is involved in a process of creating itself. However, this process of self-creation produces a different account of the relationship between the self and the social/political realm than the one produced in liberal theories of the self and politics, as ‘the act of continual self-creation recasts autonomy as subject *formation*, not just the actions of a prepolitical subject who generates the law’ (p. 142). For Rasmussen, self-creation and subject formation are seen to be intrinsic to being a self; and autonomy is seen to be an important political and philosophical concept,



as subjects are subject ‘to their own will to will, a compulsion to aspire to demonstrate their autonomy’ (p. 146).

Rasmussen’s work successfully shows the importance of giving due consideration to the concept of autonomy, even if we subscribe to a post-foundationalist understanding of the self. Her argument is that even without the idea of the sovereign individual at the center of political thought (as in liberal theory), there is still a ‘case for the importance of autonomy’ in helping us to understand the place of the self in the social/political realm (p. 4). Although making a powerful case for the concept of autonomy, Rasmussen’s work exposes a need to think differently about the concept, and to conceptualize it outside of a liberal framework.

Chris Hughes
University of Manchester, UK
christopher.hughes-2@manchester.ac.uk