In this paper, I will be discussing why autonomy is essential in making ethical choices. My goal is to discern why ethical choices are influenced by our autonomy and the consequences of making decisions while lacking full, or any, autonomy. I will achieve this goal by presenting cases which defend the idea of ethical autonomy and justify this need for autonomy in making ethical decisions.

Autonomy is simply the idea that means you are an individual that is capable of making free choices and are self-determining. In order to be considered autonomous, one must meet the conditions of autonomy. The first is the Independence Condition. This states that one must have the capacity for making autonomous choices without any control from inner compulsions or external constraint. The second is the Competency Condition. This means that an individual has the ability to deliberate rationally of their choices. Finally, the last is the Authenticity Condition. This means that the individual must have the ability to personally evaluate their values, goals, and commitments.

Without autonomy, it is essentially impossible to consistently make ethical decisions in our everyday lives. The main reasons for this have to do with a lack of the ability to fully immerse yourself or understand the magnitude of the situations that occur in our lives that force us to make choices when we don’t have the moral capacity for autonomy. One example where this is very evident is in the decisions of young children. The children physically have not developed the proper mental capacity for making autonomous decisions, which results in children often making illogical decisions that could potentially lead them to harm or doing harm
to others. This lack of understanding is the reason that it is important to have autonomy when making decisions, for without it our judgement of situations is blinded and incomprehensive of all the possible outcomes of the choices we make. Therefore, without autonomy we are virtually unable to make any ethical decisions.

In order for us to say that we need autonomy to make ethical decisions, we must have boundaries set for what is considered to be autonomous thought. Autonomy is characterized by the idea that an individual must have the moral capacity to engage in autonomous thought. There are many situations that would make it easy to argue that someone was not thinking autonomously for several reasons. As I mentioned earlier, children are one of the most basic examples of people who lack the capacity for autonomy due to their innocence, adolescence, and underdeveloped brains. Their thought process is naturally naïve due to the fact that they have little experience with the world and because of their incapacity to comprehend the situations that go on around them in the adult world. Other ways that autonomy may be affected range anywhere from individuals with mental disorders (dementia, phobias, depression, etc.) to someone who is under the influence of alcohol or drugs. While it could be argued that some under these circumstances would have some sense of autonomy, their thought processes would still be affected by these circumstances enough that their idea of autonomy would be underperforming when trying to make ethical decisions. This occurs because our decisions are coming from outside influences other than what would be perceived as normal autonomous thought. This is why someone is more likely to make a bad or immoral decision when they are drunk than they would if they were sober.
On the contrary to all of this, I think it is important to point out that just because an individual makes an ethical choice does not mean that they are fully autonomous. Thus being said, it is not safe to assume that someone is autonomous solely because they have made an ethical decision. It is possible for someone who lacks autonomy to make ethical decisions, the likelihood is much less, but they may make ethical decisions without fully understanding the consequences of their decisions. Someone lacking full autonomy may be able to make some ethical choices, but still have compulsions to make unwarranted unethical choices. Overall, it is possible for someone lacking full autonomy to make a few ethical choices, but they are very likely to make many unethical choices that outweigh the ethical ones.

One typical problem we find in society when it comes to individuals lacking autonomy is when we try to overstep our bounds and make decisions for someone else without permission from the individual themselves. We find this happens often because someone with autonomy sees that the outcome that will occur from the slight interference is much more beneficial to society than the outcome that were to have come from the unethical choice. Certain cases could argue that it is our moral duty to make autonomous decisions for those who can’t, but others say that it is their individual right to decide what they want to with their lives and the choices they make. Personally, I think it is best to make whatever decisions will benefit society most. However, this is sometimes not an easy thing to see.

One specific case that I would like to address that holds a lot of controversy is the case about the legal drinking age. Currently the legal drinking age is twenty-one. The idea behind this is that we are less likely to be involved in dangerous drinking or drunk driving at the age of
twenty-one than age eighteen for instance. The logic behind this goes back to autonomy in the sense that even as late teens we feel like we should be autonomous by now, but really, we aren’t fully autonomous yet. I think it is safe to say that teens are not fully autonomous based on the way that they are frequently making immoral decisions and acting out of ignorance. The main argument that someone could give for teens having autonomy would be that at this point in many teens lives they have already made important life decisions such as marriage, having children, living on their own, and making their own income. While these aspects are important decisions, they are not always autonomous decisions. Often people say that if they are old enough to go war or to vote then they should be slowed to drink. I believe that the legal drinking age should remain twenty-one due to this lack of autonomy. This does raise another question though. Maybe rather than trying to lower the drinking age we should try to raise the voting age and the age that we can enlist for military service to twenty-one. This case is difficult to interpret because many different people have different opinions on why or why not teens are considered autonomous.

In conclusion, autonomy is a very important role in ethical decision making. It is also important to consider how autonomy affects the decisions that we make and why we need it for making ethical decisions. These examples have expressed ways that ethics is conveyed through our autonomy and how autonomy played a role in these decisions. It is evident that our autonomy or lack of autonomy can have a very powerful impact on the choices we make throughout our everyday lives. Without autonomy, we would have no basis making for ethical decisions.
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Ethical Choices

Ethics Needs Autonomy