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Author	圓増, 文(Enzo, Aya)
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Autonomy as an object of “respect”: Re-examining the concept in the context of biomedical ethics

Aya ENZO

In recent discussions about autonomy in normative ethics, there have been two overall trends. First, discussions focus on the Kantian concept of autonomy on which autonomy is construed as having special connection with morality. Second, discussions focus on a more individual autonomy (also known as personal autonomy) on which autonomy is not necessarily construed in the aforementioned way. The dominant conception of autonomy in biomedical ethics has been more inspired from the discussions regarding the second trend than those of the first. The aim of this paper is to re-examine this dominant conception in biomedical ethics. First, by analyzing the autonomy in biomedical ethics, this paper notes that this conception has the same features with those found in second trend. Second, by investigating the medical decision-making process, based on the current conception of autonomy in biomedical ethics, this paper shows that this conception does not work well in clinical practice. Finally, by focusing on Onora O’Neill’s discussion about “principled autonomy,” which is classified as that in the first trend,” this paper focuses on what type of decision-making process should be applied in the light of this conception, and whether such process conforms to the recently accepted view in clinical practice. Results show that it would be more effective to construe autonomy as a constraint (something found between patients and medical professions as a moral agent), rather than as an object of respect (something found among patients as an object of moral actions).