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Work, moral responsibility, and autonomy

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Structure:

I. The case: Microsoft workers' protest

- A struggle *for-autonomy-for-the-sake-of-moral-responsibility*

II. An argument for workplace autonomy

- based on the normative resources provided by these struggles, i.e. moral responsibility as ground for autonomy

III. Objections to the proposed argument

I. The case:

HoloLens For Good, Not War

Dear Satya Nadella and Brad Smith,

We are a global coalition of Microsoft workers, and we refuse to create technology for warfare and oppression. We are alarmed that Microsoft is working to provide weapons technology to the U.S. Military, helping one country's government "increase lethality" using tools we built. We did not sign up to develop weapons, and we demand a say in how our work is used.

In November, Microsoft was awarded the \$479 million Integrated Visual Augmentation System (IVAS) contract with the United States Department of the Army. The contract's stated objective is to "rapidly develop, test, and manufacture a single platform that Soldiers can use to Fight, Rehearse, and Train that provides increased lethality, mobility, and situational awareness necessary to achieve overmatch against our current and future adversaries.". Microsoft intends to apply its HoloLens augmented reality technology to this purpose. While the company has previously licensed tech to the U.S. Military, it has never crossed the line into weapons development. With this contract, it does. The application of HoloLens within the IVAS system is designed to help people kill. It will be deployed on the battlefield, and works by turning warfare into a simulated "video game," further distancing soldiers from the grim stakes of war and the reality of bloodshed.

Brad Smith's suggestion that employees concerned about working on unethical projects "would be allowed to move to other work within the company" ignores the problem that workers are not properly informed of the use of their work. There are many engineers who contributed to HoloLens before this contract even existed, believing it would be used to help architects and engineers build buildings and cars, to help teach people how to perform surgery or play the piano, to push the boundaries of gaming, and to connect with the Mars Rover (RIP). These engineers have now lost their ability to make decisions about what they work on, instead finding themselves implicated as war profiteers.

Source: <https://twitter.com/MsWorkers4/status/1099066343523930112>

The peculiarity of the protest:

- a. Microsoft employees are not indifferent towards the moral implications of their work; in their view, moral responsibility is part of their work agency: “we did not sign up to develop weapons”
 - b. workers lack the workplace autonomy necessary to exercise their moral responsibility. They are not granted a say in these matters, and this exposes them to moral suffering: the engineers, we are told, “found themselves implicated as war profiteers”
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- Conclusion: the protest is a struggle *for autonomy-for-the-sake-of-moral-responsibility*

II. An argument for workplace autonomy

A. Moral responsibility as teleological ground for autonomy

i. The 'expansive' sense of autonomy:

1. Intrinsic conditions of autonomy: cognitive, motivational capacities and abilities
2. Extrinsic conditions of autonomy: institutional, organisational support, access to resources, taking part in social practices
3. Intrinsic and extrinsic conditions are necessary conditions (Honneth, 2014)

ii. The 'expansive' sense of moral responsibility

1. Intrinsic conditions: e.g. the capacity to dif. between good and evil, decode and apply moral norms etc.
2. Extrinsic conditions: in social contexts one must be able to take part in the process of decision making in which morally relevant decisions are made

iii. Implication: in social contexts moral responsibility can function as an end state in virtue of which autonomy is developed and/or realized

- This happens when being-a-responsible-agent is the end state in light of which society, organisations, groups, grant agents access to the means necessary to develop/realize autonomy

A. First claim: Moral responsibility can function as teleological ground for autonomy

B. Workers are in principle morally responsible for the work they do

Two reasons:

- i. Work is an activity based on motives, judgements, and implies justification
- ii. Work outputs can be (im)moral

In virtue of i) And ii) one is *in principle* one is responsible for the work one does

The case for workplace autonomy

Two claims:

- A. Moral responsibility can function as teleological ground for autonomy
- B. Working implies moral responsibility for one's own work

The argument:

- i. If workers are 'destined' for a specific form of moral responsibility on the basis of their work agency,
- ii. If a specific form of workplace autonomy is a necessary condition for exercising moral responsibility ("extrinsic" but necessary condition)
- iii. Then, workers should be granted a specific form of workplace autonomy for the sake of moral responsibility.

The example of companies as productive agents:

- From a teleological point of view, companies *qua* productive agents are granted a consistent degree of autonomy for the sake of moral responsibility
- Workers too are productive agents, so this condition should be extended to them, at least in principle

III. The argument might not work

A. The principle does not function in any situation:

- exceptions as derogations cannot be excluded.
- *states of exception* in which derogation should be allowed: work activity, its form and content, resembles a *necessary* occurrence outweighing the agent's will

Implication: if autonomy is impossible, then the situation is one of exception, and moral responsibility for one's own work should be suspended

B. Is the workers' condition a state of exception?

- workers encounter the workplace as a structured space, its organisation is imposed on them as an objective necessity to which one must *adapt*

Implication: factual lack of autonomy

- factual lack of autonomy is not sufficient; if workers' state is genuinely one of exception then, lack of autonomy must in turn prove to be necessary, to be justified

C. Three types of reasons for why factual lack of autonomy is justified/necessary:

1. The argument by appeal to technical necessity
2. The argument by appeal to moral expertise
3. The rationale of power relations

1. The argument by appeal to technical necessity

- a. The workplace is a site of production, its organisation is dictated by technical requirements, and governed by instrumental reason (Keane, 1975), (Habermas, 1987), (Honneth, 1995)
- b. Enhancing autonomy must imply a minimal reorganisation of the workplace
- c. Reorganisation of the workplace for the sake of autonomy risks impairing the functional requirements of production.

Implication: c) is not acceptable because of a)

Objection: the argument does not apply to the case considered here

Two reasons:

- a. The process of decision making, the kind of autonomy required, are not stages/elements in the process of production
- b. The reorganisation of the workplace necessary for enhancing workers autonomy, at least the kind considered here, does not imply a reorganisation of the process of production *per se*

2. The argument by appeal to moral expertise

- a. Moral *expertise* is required for appraising the moral quality of work outputs
- b. Acquiring moral expertise might imply specialized training
- c. If workers lack expertise, then they are not in position to participate, and it is not fair to overburden them with such expectations

Implication: In this case workers' inability is "intrinsic" to them, they fail to exhibit the required competences

Three objections based on the proposed case

- a. The very act criticising the technology in question by appeal to moral justifications can be seen as the performance or manifestation of moral capability
- b. Moral “expertise” is not the same as scientific expertise: morality cannot be monopolised by a group or another, not even by ‘experts’
- c. Lack of relevant knowledge might be due to “extrinsic” conditions, e.g. *enforced ignorance*:

“Although a review process exists for ethics in AI, AETHER, it is **opaque** to Microsoft workers [...] Microsoft **fails to inform** its engineers on the intent of the software they are building.”

3. The rationale of power relations

An explanation for factual lack of autonomy:

- a. Workplaces are spaces in which relations of power are embedded
- b. Hierarchies of power establish *who* decides who can do and say what
- c. Hierarchies of power can make autonomy impossible

The explanation cannot justify the workers' condition as a *state of exception*:

- a. The impossibility is not the result of unsurpassable necessity
- b. Hierarchies of power can be challenged, and protested against

Conclusion

Even if hierarchies of power make autonomy impossible, they cannot justify the workers' condition as a *state of exception*, nor can do so the appeal to technical necessity, or to moral expertise.

Summary

- a. An argument for workplace autonomy:
 - i. Moral responsibility can function as teleological ground for autonomy
 - ii. Workers' are in principle morally responsible for the work they do
 - iii. The principle (ii.) can function as teleological ground for workplace autonomy

- b. The argument does not work if the workers' condition is a *state of exception*.

Reasons for workers' condition as a state of exception: the argument by appeal to technical necessity, by appeal to moral expertise, the rationale of power relations.

References

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