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Original article

# Individual Autonomy: Self, Culture, and Bioethics

*Autonomía individual: persona, cultura y bioética*

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## Abstract

This paper problematizes the concept of individual autonomy in the on-going project of attempting to understand and construct global principles of bioethics. We argue that autonomy as it is commonly defined and interpreted, and the emphasis that is placed on it, presupposes an individualistic concept of the self, family, and community that arises out of a Euro- Western liberal tradition and that is often in tension with various non-Western perspectives. We conclude that a more globally dialogical approach to bioethics is required.

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**Keywords:** Bioethics; Medical ethics; Meta-ethics; Global ethics; Individual autonomy; Cultural diversity

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## Resumen

Este ensayo problematiza el concepto de autonomía individual con relación al proyecto en curso por comprender y construir principios globales para la bioética. Nuestro argumento es que la autonomía, tal como es corrientemente definida e interpretada, y el énfasis que se pone en ella, presupone una noción individualista de la persona y de la sociedad que deriva de la tradición liberal Euro-Occidental. Ese individualismo está frecuentemente en tensión con otras variadas perspectivas no occidentales. En conclusión, afirmamos la necesidad de una aproximación dialógica global a la bioética en general.

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*Palabras clave:* Bioética; Ética médica; Ética global; Autonomía individual; Diversidad cultural

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## Background

It is becoming evident that a wide range of ethical theories, from environmental ethics to human rights and bioethics, uncritically privilege a particular constellation of views regarding self and agency that are parochial to Euro-Western cultures. Such theories are often grounded in epistemological and ontological assumptions that are in tension with a wide variety of non-Western ethical traditions. This is problematic since such theories are often purported to be universal and global in both scope and application. Recently several authors in bioethics have argued that many such ethical theories may not have the kind of sweeping universality as once purported. Nathan Cherny places emphasis on how cultural factors may allow for variations around certain ethical principles, namely voluntary diminished autonomy (Cherny, 2012). Gilbar and Miola also have expressed that the application of hitherto recognized ethical principles to patients of non-western cultural backgrounds may actually undermine self-determination rather than enhancing it (Gilbar & Miola, 2015). Finally, Shimon Glick contends that while Western approaches to bioethics present themselves as canonical truth, it is important to be open and aware of the voices and contributions that global others may have to offer to bioethical thinking (Glick, 1997). While this research makes insightful contributions, we would argue that insufficient attention is paid to broader concepts of self and agency that underlie many of the ethical tensions discussed which we explore in this paper.

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