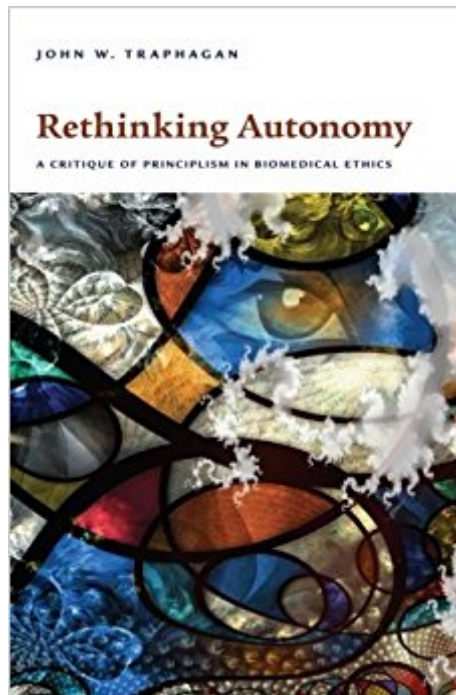


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# Rethinking Autonomy: A Critique Of Principlism In Biomedical Ethics



## Synopsis

This groundbreaking book offers a critical examination of the concept of autonomy, one with major implications for biomedical ethics. Working from the perspectives of ethnography and medical anthropology, John W. Traphagan argues that the notion of autonomy as a foundational principle of a common morality, the view dominant in North America, is inadequate as a universal moral category because culture deeply influences how people think about autonomy and the fundamental nature of being human. Drawing from fieldwork in Japan, Traphagan reveals a notably different sensibility, demonstrating how Japanese moral concepts and actions are based upon a deep awareness of the social embeddedness of people and an aesthetic sensitivity that emphasizes context and situation over universality in making moral evaluations of behavior. Traphagan develops data from Japan into a critical examination of how scholarly research in biomedical ethics, and ethics more generally, is conducted in North America. Arguing in a vein related to the emerging area of naturalized biomedical ethics, Traphagan proposes the creation of an empirically grounded study of moral behavior.

## Book Information

Paperback: 176 pages

Publisher: State University of New York Press; 1 edition (January 1, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1438445520

ISBN-13: 978-1438445526

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 0.4 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.7 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 1 customer review

Best Sellers Rank: #337,002 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #109 in [Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Bioengineering > Biomedical Engineering](#) #286 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Ethics](#) #352 in [Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Medical Ethics](#)

## Customer Reviews

"Rethinking Autonomy is the first comprehensive comparison of a non-Western moral system in the context of Western philosophy, religious studies, and ethics. This is a seminal work--a masterpiece--that will be of great importance for biomedical ethicists." -- Barbara Oakley, coeditor of *Pathological Altruism*"In our increasingly multicultural societies, a volume such as this is essential.

With life, death, and legal issues at stake, it is an important contribution that those in the health, legal, and social services professions will find valuable as they navigate the complex terrain of making decisions and counseling other people in making decisions, often in emotionally charged, if not traumatic, contexts." -- Paula Arai, author of *Bringing Zen Home: The Healing Heart of Japanese Women's Rituals*

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Provides a critique of and alternative to the dominant paradigm used in biomedical ethics by exploring the Japanese concept of autonomy.

John Traphagan's *Rethinking Autonomy* is a much needed theoretical intervention in American biomedical ethics, which tend to rely on and, in the process, naturalize a very particularly Western conceptualization of personal autonomy. Traphagan draws on his years of experience as a medical anthropologist of Japan in order to demonstrate the ethnocentrism implicit in the cultural category of autonomy. He does this by presenting a comparative analysis of Japanese and American ethics and personhood. Traphagan effortlessly weaves together a moving picture that brings into stark contrast the differences between the two forms of ethics, while at the same time avoiding the common tendency to Orientalize or essentialize Japanese culture. One way Traphagan avoids these common traps is by laying out a highly sophisticated theory of culture that speaks to the fluidity of culture and human experience. He does this while emphasizing the simultaneous empirical inaccuracy and human necessity of reifying cultural categories--of speaking about cultures as if they were bounded and maximally durable "things" rather than constantly flowing realities. Another fascinating aspect of Traphagan's work is the emphasis on the aesthetic dimensions of Japanese ethics. Traphagan draws attention to the relationships among cultural images and ideals, bodily (including emotional) states, and ethics. Traphagan presents the case of Japanese ethics, which are situational in nature; Japanese ethics tend to rely more on the aesthetic value of particular contexts, rather than on inherent Truths, with a capital T. This is an extremely thought-provoking take on ethics, perhaps particularly for those without a background in anthropology or philosophy. Overall, this is a beautifully written book with a politically and practically charged message: To naturalize, absolutize, and universalize moral categories results in the symbolic and material brutalization of both individuals and groups. A more superior ethics would rise above this brutalizing tendency, allowing human beings a level of fluidity in moral action that more closely corresponds with empirical reality.

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