



# CENTRE FOR BIOETHICS

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VIII Annual Symposium on Biomedicine, Ethics and Society: "Rethinking Informed Consent: The limits of autonomy"

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## **Autonomy and informed consent: A mistaken association?**

Recently, a number of philosophers have questioned the conventional view that the moral justification for informed consent is primarily based on the principle of respect for autonomy. These timely critiques reveal the need to distinguish between two questions: One is whether informed consent, as conventionally understood, is in fact a means of enabling, protecting, or respecting something that might reasonably be called 'autonomy'; the other is whether autonomy, so construed, has the sort of significance that would warrant the moral status that informed consent is typically thought to enjoy. I argue that while the critics of the conventional view are right in pointing out that the relationship between autonomy and informed consent has been much misunderstood, their arguments for this fail to establish that no valid moral justification for informed consent can be based on respect for autonomy. I also argue, however, that once we have understood the nature and limits of the autonomy-based justification for informed consent, we are in a better position to assess the relative importance of the principle of respect for autonomy, and to envision ways of adhering to it that could replace conventional informed consent procedures in contexts where the requirement for such consent is most controversial.