

AUTARCHY

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Political Science, Economics, Psychiatry, Developmental Psychology.

1. Core Definition

The term **autarchy** (derived from the Greek *auto*, meaning "self," and *arkhos*, meaning "ruler" or "chief") fundamentally describes a state of absolute, supreme, and independent power or rule. This concept holds distinct, though related, meanings across various academic disciplines, primarily centering on self-sufficiency and unqualified authority. In its most generalized sense, especially within political and economic discourse, autarchy denotes a nation or system that operates entirely independent of external aid, trade, or political influence, emphasizing internal sovereignty and complete self-reliance, essentially functioning as a closed system. This political-economic definition often contrasts with the term autarky, which specifically refers to economic self-sufficiency, although the two terms are frequently used interchangeably in contemporary English, leading to potential semantic confusion. Autarchy, however, often carries the stronger connotation of supreme governmental or sovereign power.

The second, highly specialized definition of **autarchy** originates within psychoanalytic theory and developmental psychology. Here, the term is used to describe a specific stage of human infancy characterized by the child's perceived absolute power and entitlement over their immediate environment, particularly their primary caregivers. According to this psychiatric model, the infant, unable to distinguish fully between the self and the external world, experiences a period where all instinctual demands are met instantaneously and unconditionally by the parents. This creates an illusion of omnipotence, where the child effectively exerts "autocratic power" over those who satisfy their needs. The infant's utter inability to sustain themselves or attend to their own fundamental necessities--such as feeding, cleanliness, or comfort--paradoxically necessitates and reinforces this state of perceived autocratic control over the adults who manage these tasks.

Thus, the core definitions of **autarchy** highlight two different manifestations of absolute control: one relating to external, political independence and national sovereignty, and the other relating to the internal, psychological developmental stage of the human being. While the political meaning focuses on a deliberate, self-imposed isolation and command structure, the psychological meaning describes an involuntary, transient stage of development rooted in profound dependence and the initial lack of ego structure necessary to distinguish between desire and reality. Both usages, nevertheless, share the common root idea of unqualified, supreme rule or dominance, whether over a nation or over a nurturing environment.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The linguistic lineage of **autarchy** is firmly rooted in classical Greek, where *autarkhia* signified self-sufficiency, often relating to the moral or philosophical independence of the individual, particularly within Stoic philosophy. However, the term evolved to be heavily intertwined with political organization. Historically, when applied to states, **autarchy** was often a descriptive term for forms of governance characterized by the unchecked power of a single ruler or small elite, synonymous with autocracy. This usage peaked during periods where centralized authority and absolute monarchy were the dominant political paradigms. The shift towards defining it specifically as economic isolation--a practice often attempted by nations during wartime or periods of severe protectionism--became more pronounced in the 20th century, particularly following the global conflicts and the rise of nationalist economic policies.

The conceptual journey of **autarchy** into developmental psychology represents a much later adaptation, emerging primarily from early 20th-century psychoanalytic theory. Thinkers concerned with the genesis of the ego and the development of object relations sought terminology to describe the initial, highly narcissistic phase of infancy. This phase required a term powerful enough to capture the complete subjective experience of control and satisfaction. Analysts recognized that the infant, being entirely incapable of independent survival, projects an image of self-sufficiency onto their own desires, facilitated by the immediate responsiveness of the caregiver. This psychiatric conceptualization of **autarchy**, therefore, became a critical descriptor of the pre-Oedipal stage where the boundaries between the internal world (desire) and the external world (reality) are fluid, before the emergence of the reality principle and the establishment of distinct ego functions.

It is crucial to note the ongoing debate regarding the differentiation between **autarchy** (rule by self) and **autarky** (self-sufficiency). While purists maintain that autarchy strictly refers to supreme political authority (autocracy) and autarky refers exclusively to economic self-reliance, historical usage has blurred these lines considerably. Many modern economic texts utilize **autarchy** to describe economic isolation, while political theorists might use **autarky** to describe a self-governing, sovereign state. The source content provided explicitly uses **autarchy** to encapsulate both the general notion of "supreme and absolute power" and the specific psychological phase, confirming the broad scope and often overlapping usage of the term in contemporary discourse, necessitating careful contextual interpretation.

3. Key Characteristics

The characteristics of **autarchy** can be delineated based on the domain in which the term is applied, yet both manifest a complete lack of reliance on external forces for control or satisfaction. In the socio-political realm, the key characteristic is **supreme sovereignty**. An autarchic state is

one that possesses total command over its internal affairs without needing or accepting external validation or interference. This often leads to highly centralized, non-democratic forms of government where power flows from a singular source, making consensus secondary to command. Economically, this translates into policies designed to eliminate imports and foreign investment, prioritizing domestic production and consumption, irrespective of comparative advantage.

From the psychiatric perspective, the **autarchic phase of infancy** exhibits characteristics centered on perceived omnipotence and absolute instinctual demand satisfaction. During this period, the infant's psychological state is characterized by the belief that their desires instantly manifest reality. Crying leads directly to comfort; hunger leads immediately to feeding. The primary characteristic is the absence of frustration tolerance, as the infant has not yet developed the cognitive framework to understand delay or denial. This phase is naturally fleeting; the caregiver's inevitable inability to provide constant, immediate satisfaction introduces the first external resistances, which initiates the crucial process of differentiating the self from the object (the caregiver) and moving toward independence.

Furthermore, a unifying characteristic across both definitions is the concept of **closed boundaries**. For the state, autarchy implies closed national borders to political influence and, often, to trade. For the infant, the boundary between the internal and external world is psychologically closed; the infant's world is wholly defined by internal sensation and need, making the outside world merely an extension of the self designed to satisfy those needs. This condition of closed boundaries is inherently unstable in both contexts. Politically, isolation often leads to inefficiency and technological stagnation; psychologically, the state of autarchy must dissolve for the individual to develop mature object relationships and adaptive ego functions necessary for adult life.

4. Political and Economic Significance

In the fields of political science and international relations, **autarchy** holds significant negative connotations, often being associated with regimes that prioritize absolute control over liberty and efficiency. Historically, attempts at complete national autarchy, such as those pursued by certain Fascist states or Communist regimes aiming for self-sufficiency, have demonstrated profound economic vulnerabilities. While the initial goal is protection from global market fluctuations and foreign political leverage, the reality is often technological lag, insufficient resource allocation, and a lower quality of life for citizens due to limited competition and inefficient domestic monopolies. A truly autarchic system cannot benefit from the efficiencies of specialization or international trade, fundamentally limiting its growth potential.

The political significance of **autarchy** lies in its relationship to sovereignty and power centralization. A state striving for autarchy asserts its ultimate authority, rejecting the interdependence that characterizes modern globalized politics. This assertion is often a reaction against perceived

threats to national identity or control, manifesting in isolationist foreign policies. This pursuit contrasts sharply with concepts like interdependence theory, which posits that cooperation and integration are essential for modern state stability. Thus, autarchy serves as a theoretical and practical extreme on the spectrum of international engagement, representing maximal detachment and self-rule.

Contemporary discussion of **autarchy** sometimes resurfaces during debates over globalization, trade wars, and national security. While full autarchy is virtually impossible in the modern era due to global supply chains and integrated financial systems, nations may implement "selective autarchy" measures--such as maintaining domestic production of critical goods (e.g., semiconductors, medical supplies, defense technology)--to reduce strategic vulnerability. These actions, driven by the desire to maintain sovereign control over crucial resources, reflect a partial application of autarchic principles designed to mitigate dependence without resorting to complete isolation.

5. Psychoanalytic and Developmental Significance

Within developmental psychology, the concept of the **autarchic phase** is vital for understanding early personality formation and the genesis of self-perception. This initial stage of subjective omnipotence is considered a necessary and natural component of development, providing the infant with a sense of security and trust that forms the foundation for later independence. The significance lies in how the infant transitions out of this phase. The gradual realization that the caregiver is a separate entity--an object that sometimes delays gratification or fails to immediately meet a demand--is essential for the formation of the boundaries of the self (the ego). This transition is intrinsically linked to the development of frustration tolerance, crucial for emotional regulation and social adaptation throughout life.

The concept of infantile **autarchy** is closely related to psychoanalytic ideas of primary narcissism. During this phase, the libido is focused entirely on the self, and the external world is not yet recognized as having independent existence or demands. The developmental task involves moving from this state of self-centered control to one of object relations, where the child learns to navigate the needs and realities of others. Failure to successfully navigate the termination of this autarchic stage--or retaining excessive characteristics of perceived entitlement and omnipotence into later childhood or adulthood--can be linked to certain forms of narcissistic personality structures or difficulties in establishing mature, reciprocal relationships.

Furthermore, the autarchic infant's relationship with the caregiver highlights the profound influence of the environment on initial psychological structure. The infant, through their sheer helplessness and immediate demands, forces the parent into a temporary, quasi-subservient role. The source content's example, "An infant exert **autarchy** over his or her parents because he or she cannot be

left alone or tend to his or her own needs," perfectly illustrates this paradoxical power born of total dependence. The adult's role is not simply meeting needs, but gently managing the dissolution of this fantasy of absolute rule, guiding the infant toward accepting reality and the limits of personal power.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Debates surrounding **autarchy** span both its political and psychological applications. Politically, the primary criticism levied against autarchic systems is their inherent unsustainability and inefficiency. Critics argue that the pursuit of total economic and political isolation is a fantasy that defies the interconnected reality of the modern world, often serving as a justification for protectionism and authoritarian rule rather than genuine self-sufficiency. Furthermore, historical evidence suggests that autarchic states often rely on significant internal coercion to maintain control and suppress dissent that might arise from economic scarcity or resource imbalances.

In developmental psychology, the criticism often focuses on the language used to describe the infant's state. While the concept of infantile **autarchy** effectively captures the child's subjective experience of immediate satisfaction, some theorists argue that framing this dependency as "autocratic power" is misleading. The infant's control is not based on intentional will or strategic domination, but rather on biological imperative and profound vulnerability. A more nuanced view suggests that the infant is experiencing **omnipotence fantasies** projected onto the world, rather than actively exerting political rule over their environment. The power lies not in the child's strength, but in the parent's unwavering commitment to care, making the perceived power highly derivative and dependent on the external source.

Finally, the terminological overlap between **autarchy** and **autarky** remains a source of scholarly disagreement. Many economic and political dictionaries now explicitly prefer **autarky** for economic self-sufficiency to avoid confusion with **autarchy** meaning autocracy or supreme rule. While the source material integrates both meanings under the single term **autarchy**, modern academic rigor often necessitates maintaining the subtle distinction: autarchy pertaining to the nature of rule (power structure) and autarky pertaining to the state of supply (economic closure). Ignoring this distinction can lead to ambiguity when analyzing historical or economic policies where the intent is solely economic independence rather than absolute political dictatorship.

Further Reading

[Autarky \(Economic Self-Sufficiency\) on Wikipedia](#)

[Autocracy \(Supreme Political Rule\) on Wikipedia](#)

[Basics of Developmental Psychology](#)

[Autarky Definition and Historical Examples \(Britannica\)](#)