RELATIONAL AUTONOMY

Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self

EDITED BY

CATRIONA MACKENZIE
NATALIE STOLJAR

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Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar

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CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Autonomy Refigured

Catriona Mackenzie
Natalie Stoljar

Introduction

In the current climate of feminist theory, the notion of individual autonomy may seem an unlikely topic for a collection of feminist essays. Although the ideal of autonomy once seemed to hold out much promise, in providing both a liberatory goal and a moral standpoint from which to criticize sex-based oppression, autonomy is now generally regarded by feminist theorists with suspicion. Crudely stated, the charge is that the concept of autonomy is inherently masculinist, that it is inextricably bound up with masculine character ideals, with assumptions about selfhood and agency that are metaphysically, epistemologically, and ethically problematic from a feminist perspective, and with political traditions that historically have been hostile to women's interests and freedom. What lies at the heart of these charges is the conviction that the notion of individual autonomy is fundamentally individualistic and rationalistic.

The aim of this collection is to challenge this conviction. While it is true that feminist critiques of autonomy have identified serious theoretical and political problems with some historical and contemporary conceptions of autonomy, the notion of autonomy is vital to feminist attempts to understand oppression, subjection, and agency. Moreover, none of the major feminist critiques justifies repudiating the concept altogether. The challenge facing feminist theorists is rather to draw on aspects

of the feminist critique of autonomy to reconceptualize and refigure the concept of individual autonomy from a feminist perspective. It is this refigured concept that we are calling "relational autonomy."[1]

The term "relational autonomy," as we understand it, does not refer to a single unified conception of autonomy but is rather an umbrella term, designating a range of related perspectives. These perspectives are premised on a shared conviction, the conviction that persons are socially embedded and that agents' identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Thus the focus of relational approaches is to analyze the implications of the intersubjective and social dimensions of selfhood and identity for conceptions of individual autonomy and moral and political agency.

The purpose of this introduction is to situate relational approaches to autonomy in the context of both feminist critiques of autonomy and contemporary philosophical accounts of autonomy. We outline and assess five major feminist critiques of autonomy and then map out the conceptual terrain of contemporary philosophical accounts of autonomy, focusing in particular on the vexed relationship between autonomy and socialization. Finally, we draw on the conclusions of the previous two sections to provide a more detailed characterization of relational models of autonomy. Before proceeding to these more detailed discussions, however, it is worth providing a general overview of the notion of autonomy within contemporary moral and political philosophy.

The concept of individual autonomy has come to occupy a central, if contested, place in moral and political philosophy. For example, questions concerning the nature and value of individual autonomy and its compatibility with a recognition of the social embeddedness of persons are central to current debates in political philosophy among liberals, communitarians, and feminists.[2] Whereas the value of autonomy is contested in political philosophy, this is less the case in applied ethics and legal philosophy. In these areas, disputants on either side of a range of different debates often agree on the value, even the primacy, of autonomy but disagree about how it is best promoted. In bioethics, for example, appeals to patient autonomy figure prominently in debates about voluntary active euthanasia, in analyses of the physician-patient relationship, and in debates about the ethics of reproductive technologies and surrogate motherhood, with the different disputants in these debates each claiming to have autonomy on their side.[3] In legal philosophy, the appeal to individual autonomy has been used to defend an unrestricted right to freedom of speech in the context of debates concerning legal restrictions on hate speech and pornography. It has also been used to contest such a right.[4] Finally, recent debates about the nature of autonomy in moral philosophy and moral psychology intersect with, and have implications for, an increasingly broad range of philosophical debates. These include the free will–determinism debate; theories of personal identity; theories of practical reasoning and deliberation; conceptions of agency and selfhood; accounts of character and self-respect; and theories of oppression, embodiment, and subjectivity.

However, despite the importance of the notion of individual autonomy within contemporary moral and political theory, there is no consensus about what the

concept means or when it can be legitimately employed. In bioethics, autonomy is often equated with informed consent. In rational choice theory, autonomy is equated with voluntary, rational choice. In other contexts, for example, within liberal political theory, autonomy is considered to be an individual right. For liberals of a libertarian persuasion, the right to autonomy is construed as negative liberty, a right of the individual to freedom from undue interference in the exercise of choice (moral, political, personal, and religious) and in the satisfaction of individual preferences. For Rawlsian liberals, autonomy is understood in Kantian terms as the capacity for rational self-legislation and is considered to be the defining feature of persons.

The conceptual thread that links these different uses of the notion of autonomy is the idea of self-determination or self-government, which is taken to be the defining characteristic of free moral agents. Notions of autonomy as individual choice or as a political right flow from, and are derivative of, this defining characteristic. Because of the core role of the idea of autonomy as self-determination, section 3 of this introduction focuses on the notion of autonomy as it is understood in moral psychology and on the debates within that literature concerning the conditions necessary for its development and exercise.

Despite the differences that we have identified among uses of the concept of individual autonomy, there are nevertheless important overlaps between the different senses of autonomy and between the different domains in which the concept is employed. There are clear historical and conceptual links among conceptions of choice, conceptions of political rights, and conceptions of individuality, autonomy and selfhood. These links explain why the concept of autonomy is so contested among liberals, communitarians, and feminists. And they also explain why debates about autonomy are often fraught with confusion—because the *concept* of autonomy is sometimes conflated with one particular *conception* of autonomy and its attendant conceptions of choice and rights. The most obvious example is the caricature of individual autonomy as exemplified by the self-sufficient, rugged male individualist, rational maximizing chooser of libertarian theory. It is this caricature that is often the target of feminist critiques of autonomy.[5] Given the widespread cultural association of individual autonomy with this caricature, it has been, and continues to be, important for feminists to contest this particular conception of autonomy. However, it is also imperative for feminists to reclaim and reconceptualize the concept of individual autonomy and to articulate conceptions of choice and of political rights that are more adequate from a feminist perspective. To do so, feminist theorists must draw on both mainstream philosophical theories of autonomy and on feminist critiques of culturally dominant conceptions of individuality, selfhood, and moral and political agency.

Five Feminist Critiques of Autonomy

This section briefly outlines five major feminist critiques of the notion of autonomy: *symbolic*, *metaphysical*, *care*, *postmodernist*, and *diversity*. In what follows, we outline the major components of each critique, arguing that none of them justifies rejecting the concept of autonomy altogether.[6]

Symbolic Critiques

The symbolic critique of autonomy has been articulated most clearly and forcefully by Lorraine Code.[7] Code's critique is not directed toward any particular theory of autonomy but rather toward the abstraction or character ideal of the "autonomous man." This character ideal, she claims, informs mainstream moral theory and epistemology, to their detriment, and is at the heart of what she regards as the "autonomy-obsession" of contemporary Western culture. Central to this character ideal is the notion of self-sufficient independence, which functions both descriptively and prescriptively to promote a particular conception of human nature and a particular conception of the telos of human life. The descriptive premise on which the character ideal is based is the notion that human beings are capable of leading self-sufficient, isolated, independent lives. From this premise is drawn the prescriptive conclusion that the goal of human life is the realization of self-sufficiency and individuality. Code explains:

> Autonomous man is—and should be—self-sufficient, independent, and self-reliant, a self-realizing individual who directs his efforts towards maximizing his personal gains. His independence is under constant threat from other (equally self-serving) individuals: hence he devises rules to protect himself from intrusion. Talk of rights, rational self-interest, expedience, and efficiency permeates his moral, social, and political discourse. In short, there has been a gradual alignment of *autonomy* with *individualism*.[8]

Although this character ideal is an abstraction that theorists recognize is unlikely ever to be attained, nevertheless, the ideal leads in practice to a number of problematic views. First, it supports valuing substantive independence over all other values, in particular over those arising from relations of interdependence, such as trust, loyalty, friendship, caring, and responsibility. Second, it promotes a very stripped-down conception of agents as atomistic bearers of rights, a conception in which the diversity and complexity of agents are pared away and agents are reduced to an interchangeable sameness. Third, it suggests that values, social practices, relationships, and communities that are based on cooperation and interdependence threaten, or at least compromise, autonomy.

Code is right to be critical of the character ideal of the autonomous man, and she is correct in pointing out its influence in contemporary Western cultures. However, the point of Code's critique is not to urge feminists to reject the concept of autonomy altogether. She acknowledges that critical reflection and assessment are of vital importance to individual women and to feminist political goals. Her point is rather that an adequate understanding of critical assessment must begin by rejecting the conception of atomistic subjectivity characteristic of "hyperbolized autonomy" and replacing it with a relational view of subjectivity, centered on the recognition that persons are "second persons" who only become persons in relations with others.[9] Thus Code's critique is directed toward a cultural character ideal, rather than toward contemporary philosophical accounts of autonomy, and it does not provide reasons for rejecting the attempt to rehabilitate autonomy. The question that is raised, but not answered, by her critique is how to develop models of critical

reflection that are consistent with a relational conception of subjectivity. Code's contribution to this collection takes up this question by examining the role that advocacy and testimony can play in furthering the autonomy of oppressed individuals and groups.

Metaphysical Critiques

The metaphysical critiques of the notion of autonomy are some of the most entrenched in the feminist literature. They claim that attributing autonomy to agents is tantamount to supposing that agents are atomistic, or separate, or radically individualistic. Since, as feminists and others have pointed out, agents are socially embedded and seem to be at least partially constituted by the social relations in which they stand, if attributing autonomy to agents is indeed to presuppose individualism or atomism, then it seems that the attempt to articulate autonomy rests on a mistake.[10] There are four possible positions within the metaphysical critiques that we wish to distinguish, which correspond to four different understandings of the term "individualism." Individualism can be understood as any of the following claims: first, that agents are causally isolated from other agents; second, that agents' sense of themselves is independent of the family and community relationships in which they participate; third, that agents' essential properties (that is, their natures, or metaphysical identities) are all intrinsic and are not comprised, even in part, by the social relations in which they stand; and fourth, that agents are metaphysically separate individuals. We consider each version of individualism in turn.

Annette Baier argues against individualism in the first sense by proposing that persons are what she calls "second-persons." This means that the development of persons requires relations of dependency on other persons: "Persons are essentially successors, heirs to other persons who formed and cared for them, and their personality is revealed both in their relations to others and in their response to their own recognized genesis."[11] Baier's claim is a causal one about the development of persons, their personalities and capacities. If she is right, individualism in the first sense is false. Persons are not causally isolated from other persons; indeed, the development of persons *requires* relations of dependency with others. We agree with Baier's version of anti-individualism. However, a commitment to this version of anti-individualism does not justify rejecting the concept of autonomy. Most theories of autonomy—especially those we discuss in the next section—are compatible with the notion that persons are relational in Baier's sense.[12] Baier's observations recommend that any reconceptualized notion should attend to the status of persons as second persons, not that autonomy should be ruled out altogether.

The second and third senses of individualism are often run together in a common feminist critique of autonomy. This critique alleges that theories of autonomy presuppose "abstract individualism," namely, the thesis that "logically if not empirically, human beings could exist outside a social context."[13] However, since persons, and hence their characteristics and capacities, are constituted, and not simply caused, by the relations to others in which they stand, theories of autonomy presuppose a flawed conception of selfhood and should be jettisoned. The claim that agents are constituted by the social context in which they participate is ambiguous between a

psychological reading and a metaphysical one. Either it means that an agent's *sense* of herself is constituted by her social context, which denies individualism in the second sense, or it means that social relations are essential components of an agent's identity, which denies individualism in the third sense.

It is obviously correct to deny individualism in the second sense, yet to do so does not undermine the notion of autonomy. That is, we can accept that social relations influence and perhaps constitute agents' senses of themselves and their capacities, without concluding that capacities such as autonomy are nonexistent. As relational approaches to autonomy emphasize, reconceptualizations of autonomy must acknowledge the effect of social conditions on agents' senses of themselves, such as their senses of self-esteem and self-trust. Furthermore, denying individualism in the third sense, while more controversial,[14] does not undermine the notion of autonomy. Anti-individualism in the third sense entails that social relations are essential properties of persons. Yet, as far as we know, there are no theories of autonomy—with the possible exception of the hyperbolized notion described by Code—that take a stand on the question of the kinds of properties that are metaphysically essential to the existence and persistence of the autonomous agent. After all, the metaphysical question of the essential nature of persons is separate from and perhaps prior to the question of the nature of a person's characteristics and capacities, including her autonomy. Thus, even if both the second and third senses of anti-individualism are true, they provide no reason to reject autonomy.

Let us consider finally the fourth conception of individualism, which claims that agents are metaphysically separate individuals or entities. As Louise Antony points out, this sense of individualism is true even if we assume that social relations are essential properties of these individuals.[15] Moreover, the claim that the concept of individual autonomy presupposes individualism in the fourth sense is trivially true because the phrase "individual autonomy" implies that agents are separate entities with a capacity for autonomy. Thus, no theory of individual autonomy could presuppose anti-individualism in the fourth sense.

It follows that metaphysical critiques of autonomy are mistaken. If we understand "individualism" in any of the first three senses, most theories of autonomy do not presuppose individualism. If we understand "individualism" in the fourth sense, it is trivially true that theories of individual autonomy presuppose individualism. The moral of the discussion, therefore, is that the concept of individual autonomy should be distinguished from individualistic conceptions of individual autonomy. The task of this collection, namely, to rehabilitate individual autonomy, does not entail rehabilitating individualistic autonomy in any of the first three senses. Indeed taking the feminist critiques seriously is precisely to explore the possibilities for anti-individualistic conceptions of autonomy.

Care Critiques

According to care critiques, traditional ideals of autonomy give normative primacy to independence, self-sufficiency, and separation from others, at the expense of a recognition of the value of relations of dependency and interconnection. Since such relations have historically been central to women's lives and symbolically associated

with femininity, it is argued that traditional conceptions of autonomy not only devalue women's experience and those values arising from it, such as love, loyalty, friendship, and care, but also are defined in opposition to femininity. Traditional conceptions are thus masculinist conceptions.

Care critiques overlap with aspects of both symbolic critiques and metaphysical critiques. They are to be distinguished from symbolic critiques because they do not characterize the concept of autonomy as inherently tainted by the connotations of masculinist conceptions of autonomy.[16] Rather the latter conceptions are criticized as normatively flawed. Similarly, care critiques differ from metaphysical critiques because of their emphasis on the *value* of relations of nurturance and dependency for agents, rather than on the implications of these relations for the metaphysical nature of the self.

Care critiques appeal to Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic account of masculine and feminine psychic development.[17] On that account, in gender unequal societies in which women are the primary caregivers, masculine psychic individuation and separation are conflated with separation from the mother. Masculine selfhood is thus defined as other than the feminine mother and psychic autonomy, or the development of a strong sense of self, is equated with self-sufficient independence. Feminine psychic development, by contrast, involves identification with the mother and so promotes capacities for connection and interdependence, often at the expense of the development of a strong sense of self.

Virginia Held's account of the notion of the self that is at the heart of the care critiques, echoes this story:

> The self . . . is seen as having both a need for recognition and a need to understand the other, and these needs are seen as compatible. They are created in the context of mother-child interaction and are satisfied in a mutually empathetic relationship. . . . Both give and take in a way that not only contributes to the satisfaction of their needs as individuals but also affirms the 'larger relational unit' they compose. Maintaining this larger relational unit then becomes a goal, and maturity is seen not in terms of individual autonomy but in terms of competence in creating and sustaining relations of empathy and mutual intersubjectivity.[18]

The target of care critiques, and of Chodorow's critique of masculine selfhood, is autonomy understood as substantive independence. Although some care critiques unfortunately conflate autonomy with substantive independence, and therefore reject autonomy on the basis of this critique,[19] many are careful to distinguish them, as does Chodorow herself. Thus other theorists influenced by the care perspective, such as Jennifer Nedelsky, argue for a reconceptualization of autonomy modeled on the mother-child relationship.[20] Such reconceptualizations give normative primacy to the relations of care and connection identified by Chodorow and Gilligan and articulate autonomy within the context of these relations.

Similarly, Evelyn Fox Keller has developed a notion of dynamic autonomy, which she contrasts with static autonomy.[21] Keller sees autonomy as a kind of competence. The distinction between dynamic and static autonomy is a distinction between, on the one hand, the kind of competence that promotes an enhanced sense of self and, on the other, the kind of competence and mastery that are pursued in

the interests of domination, denied connectedness, and defensive separateness. Dynamic autonomy involves both relatedness to, and differentiation from, others. It promotes a sense of agency in a world of "interacting and interpersonal agents" and a sense of others "as subjects with whom one shares enough to allow for a recognition of their independent interests and feelings—in short for a recognition of them as other subjects."[22] Static autonomy, on the other hand arises from seeing others as a threat to the self, from insecurity about the self, and from fears of dependency and loss of self-control, leading to patterns of domination and control over others. In its extreme forms static autonomy gives rise to sadism.[23]

Care critiques, of the kind developed by Chodorow, Held, Nedelsky, and Keller thus do not repudiate the concept of autonomy altogether. Rather they recommend that autonomy be reconceptualized so that it is not defined in opposition both to femininity and to relations of dependence and connection. The issues raised by care critiques are therefore to some extent continuous with the project of articulating a relational conception of autonomy as we understand it. However, in focusing primarily on intimate dyadic relations, particularly between mother and child, care critiques provide a very circumscribed reconceptualization of autonomy. In particular, they fail to address the complex effects of oppression on agents' capacities for autonomy; and they provide a somewhat limited reconceptualization of the social dimensions of agency and selfhood. We discuss these issues further in the last section.

Postmodernist Critiques

What we are calling, rather loosely, postmodernist critiques of autonomy derive from a number of distinct theoretical perspectives: psychoanalytic theory, Foucauldian theories of power and agency, and feminist theories of sexual difference and otherness. As far as we are aware, there is no sustained and detailed critique of contemporary philosophical accounts of autonomy from any of these perspectives. Rather, critics draw on the so-called "critique of the subject" that emerges from one or more of these perspectives to criticize the assumptions that they allege to be implicit in the ideal of autonomy. In particular, it is claimed that the ideal assumes that agents are self-transparent, psychically unified, and able to achieve self-mastery. Critics who draw on psychoanalysis charge that since Freud, these assumptions have been shown to be illusory.[24] In contrast to the complete self-transparency, seamless psychic unity, and self-mastery supposedly required by autonomy, the picture of the psyche that emerges from psychoanalytic theory depicts agents as conflict-ridden, often self-deluded, fundamentally opaque to themselves, and driven by archaic drives and desires of which they may not even be aware, let alone able to master. Critics who draw on Foucauldian theories of power and agency suggest that theories of autonomy assume a pure Kantian free will, or a true self. This assumption naively ignores the fact that subjects are constituted within and by regimes, discourses, and micropractices of power. There is no pure, self-determining free will that somehow escapes the operations of power, nor is there a true self, there to be discovered through introspective reflection. Agency must be reconceptualized not as a matter of individual will but as an effect of the complex and shifting con-

figurations of power.[25] Feminist theories of difference and otherness allege that the notion of autonomy is a historically, socially, and culturally specific ideal that parades as a universal norm. Not only does this norm suppress internal differentiation within the subject, but also in masking its specificity behind a veneer of universality, it functions coercively to suppress different others.[26]

Although they draw on rather divergent theoretical perspectives and criticize autonomy for rather divergent reasons, there is a unifying theme underlying the postmodernist critiques. The theme is that the notion of autonomy is a kind of conceit or illusion of the Enlightenment conception of the subject.[27] Thus it is charged that defenders of autonomy still cling to the Cartesian idea that consciousness can be transparently self-aware or to the Kantian view of persons as rational self-legislators, despite the fact that such views have been so decisively challenged since Nietzsche, Freud, and their heirs. Moreover, the persistence of such views is not just a harmless anachronistic hangover of the Enlightenment. It is complicit with structures of domination and subordination, in particular with the suppression of others—women, colonial subjects, blacks, minority groups—who are deemed incapable of achieving rational self-mastery.

We cannot do justice here to these different theoretical perspectives, nor have we space to discuss the complex, and conflicting, accounts of agency and subjectivity developed by each.[28] The question is whether the general critique presented by these perspectives justifies rejecting the notion of autonomy. Our view is that it does not. The general critique conflates the notion of autonomy with certain conceptions of autonomous *agents.* Conceptions of agents that require complete self-transparency and psychic unity are certainly vulnerable to the Freudian challenge. Kantian conceptions that conceive autonomous agents as free from empirical determination are vulnerable to Foucauldian critiques, among others. Likewise, some conceptions of autonomous agents have functioned historically to enforce exclusionary norms and ideals of the person. But for reasons that we discuss in the next two sections, the concept of autonomy need not be based on such assumptions about agents. It need not require agents to be completely self-transparent and psychically unified; assume that only a pure will, free from all empirical determination, can be self-determining; or enforce a hegemonic identity. Nevertheless, the postmodernist critiques are salutary, for they alert us to the need to develop notions of autonomy based on richer, more psychically complex, and more diverse conceptions of agents.

Diversity Critiques

Diversity critiques parallel postmodernist critiques in challenging the assumption that agents are cohesive and unified. Such critiques claim that each individual has a "multiple identity," which reflects the multiple groups to which the individual belongs. For example, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that "the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of racism and sexism, and these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or of antiracism."[29] Thus, the identities of individual women are "intersectional" in that they combine the group affiliations unique to that woman. A similar ambivalence inherent in the

identities of women of marginalized groups has been described by María Lugones as the experience of living within and traveling between different "worlds."[30]

The idea of intersectionality may seem incompatible with the presuppositions of theories of autonomy. It implies that because different and sometimes conflicting group identities intersect in the formation of individual identity, many individuals do not have a unified or integrated sense of self. As with the postmodernist arguments we have already discussed, if theories of autonomy are thought to presuppose a transcendental self, the conception of the self offered by diversity theorists is incompatible with that offered by theories of autonomy. Even if theories of autonomy do not presuppose a transcendental self, as we show in the next section, notions of integration are central to many accounts of autonomy. Hence intersectionality does seem potentially to undermine conceptions of autonomy that require integration.

However, while intersectionality provides an important cautionary note for theories of autonomy, it need not undermine the claim that integration is a necessary condition of autonomy. It is plausible that certain radical kinds of disintegration of the self undermine the integration condition, for example, the disintegration as a result of trauma that is described by Susan Brison. But is the fragmentation of the self implied by intersectionality an analogous kind of disintegration?[31] If not, is the ambivalence implied by intersectionality, or indeed other kinds or degrees of ambivalence, perhaps *compatible* with the integration required for autonomy? Diana Meyers takes up these questions in her contribution to this volume.

In focusing on the particular features of individuals' identities, diversity theorists attempt to explain how and why individuals should not be absorbed into some group or other. Crenshaw claims that "in the area of rape, intersectionality provides a way of explaining why women of color must abandon the general argument that the interests of the community require the suppression of any confrontation around interracial rape."[32] The resistance to seeing individuals as replicating the interests and identities of the groups to which they belong is congenial to an emphasis on *individual* autonomy. Thus, despite the problems posed for certain theories of autonomy by the notion of intersectionality, we would argue that the insights of diversity critiques, especially that agents have *particular* identities and not group identities shared with other members of the group, enhance rather than reduce the need for feminist recharacterizations of individual autonomy.

Conceptions of Autonomy in Moral Psychology

We argued in the previous section that none of the five major feminist critiques justifies repudiating the notion of autonomy. The critiques, however, do require that attempts to refigure autonomy pay attention to the complex nature of the autonomous agent and to the differentiated social and historical contexts in which agents are embedded. Feminists have been particularly concerned, in this regard, with attending to and analyzing oppressive social contexts and their effects on agents. It is here that the concerns of feminist critiques of autonomy intersect with the concerns of mainstream theories of autonomy, to which we turn in this section.

From both a feminist perspective and that of many mainstream theories, oppressive socialization often seems inimical to agents' autonomy.

Contemporary accounts of individual autonomy hold that autonomy, or self-determination, involves, at the very least, the capacity for reflection on one's motivational structure and the capacity to change it in response to reflection. This view is underpinned by the intuition that there is an important difference between those aspects of an agent's motivational structure that she unreflectively finds herself with and those aspects that, as a result of autonomous reflection, she regards as "her own." Disagreements among different accounts of autonomy arise in explicating what is involved in the process of reflection, in explaining how reflection secures autonomy, and in making sense of the notion of "one's own."

The debates within the contemporary literature arise in response to two distinct sets of issues, which we refer to as the metaphysical problem and the socialization problem. The metaphysical problem focuses on the implications of determinism for autonomy and on whether a successful compatibilist response to the problem of determinism must rely on the notion of a "true" or "metaphysical" deep self. The socialization problem focuses on the implications of socialization for autonomy. Since our primary aim is to highlight issues within the mainstream literature on autonomy that intersect with feminist concerns and to explain the impetus toward the development of relational approaches to autonomy, our discussion in this section focuses mainly on the socialization problem.

We divide theories of autonomy into *procedural* and *substantive*. There are structural, historical, and competency versions of procedural theories and strong and weak versions of substantive theories. We argue that procedural theories encounter a series of difficulties in attempting to reconcile autonomous agency with socialization, especially oppressive socialization. In particular, since structural procedural theories analyze autonomy as a feature of an agent's occurrent mental states, they cannot do justice to the historical processes of socialization leading up to those states. Although historical theories address this problem, they nevertheless face trouble in explicating the difference between autonomous and nonautonomous processes of critical reflection. In addition, historical theories are to a large extent concerned with the negative effects of socialization on autonomy, rather than the global implications of socialization for autonomy. Meyers's competency account offers a fine-grained analysis of these global implications but falters when she attempts to preserve content neutrality for her theory. These problems with procedural accounts have led some theorists to the conclusion that only a substantive account of autonomy can explain how oppressive socialization impairs autonomy.

Procedural Theories of Autonomy

The vast majority of recent theories are variants of a basic procedural account. On procedural, or content-neutral, accounts, the *content* of a person's desires, values, beliefs, and emotional attitudes is irrelevant to the issue of whether the person is autonomous with respect to those aspects of her motivational structure and the actions that flow from them.[33] What matters for autonomy is whether the agent has sub-

jected her motivations and actions to the appropriate kind of critical reflection. Where structural and historical versions of procedural theories differ from each other is in their different accounts of the processes of critical reflection necessary and sufficient to secure autonomy.[34]

Structural Theories. Structural models of autonomy focus on the agent's occurrent motivational structure and on whether the present desires, beliefs, and values on which the agent acts have been subject to the appropriate kinds of critical reflection. Most structural theories are hierarchical. Hierarchical theories distinguish different, hierarchically ordered elements of the self and characterize autonomy as requiring a certain kind of structural organization of these different elements. Of the hierarchical accounts, the most influential is that of Harry Frankfurt, which characterizes autonomy as an accord between an agent's first-order desires and her second-order volitions.[35] Frankfurt identifies an agent's will with an effective first-order desire and claims that autonomy, or freedom of the will, requires both that the agent exercise control over her will and that she identify, at the level of her second-order volitions, with her will. Identification is the outcome of a process of reflection in which the agent distinguishes those desires that she endorses or regards as "her own" from those desires that she merely finds herself with and is either indifferent to or regards as external to herself.

Within the literature, a number of important objections have been raised against Frankfurt's hierarchical account. We discuss several objections that point to more general problems facing hierarchical theories. The first objection, articulated most forcefully by Gary Watson, is the regress objection. In a nutshell, Watson argues that Frankfurt's distinction between first-order desires and second-order volitions, and the notion of identification, do not provide sufficient conditions for autonomy. For what ensures that our higher-order identifications are themselves autonomous? Watson claims that since Frankfurt's account makes no qualitative distinctions among desires, the only resource available within his account to respond to this question is to introduce yet higher orders of desire. But then the same question can be asked about our identifications at each of these higher levels.[36]

The second objection, first articulated by Irving Thalberg, is that hierarchical theories give ontological priority to certain allegedly "higher" aspects of the self, which are regarded as the person's "true" or "real" self. But why should we equate a person's true self with her higher-order desires or her valuational system? Doesn't this view simply beg the question against, for example, a Freudian account of human psychology, which depicts us as "conflict-prone systems of libidinal, destructive, morbid, self-preserving, sociable, conscientious, guilt-ridden, and other 'forces,' 'principles' or 'mini-agencies' "?[37] Even if we might prize the rational aspects of ourselves or our capacities for judgment most highly, this does not provide a justification for giving those aspects of ourselves ontological priority.

Marilyn Friedman develops two further sets of objections to hierarchical theories. First, she claims that the distinction within hierarchical theories between higher- and lower-order aspects of the self entails a problematic ontological commitment, namely, to a "true self," which discloses the agent's real metaphysical identity. If autonomy involves discovering and acting in accordance with this true self, questions

arise as to how the true self is formed and whether free agency requires the self to be undetermined. In other words, to be free, do we have to be metaphysically responsible for ourselves, or self-caused? If so, autonomy would be an impossibility.[38]

Friedman's second set of objections pinpoints the inadequacy of most hierarchical theories in dealing with, or even recognizing, the socialization problem. As Friedman points out, hierarchical theories either ignore the issue of socialization altogether or tend to assume that the higher-level self somehow transcends the influences of socialization to which the rest of the self is subject. But this assumption reintroduces a socialization version of the regress objection because the critically reflecting or higher-order self is just as subject to socialization as what we might call the "first-order" self. As a result, hierarchical theories cannot explain how agents can be autonomous with respect to their higher-level motivations, for the question can always be asked whether the higher-order aspects of the self have themselves been subject to critical reflection in the right ways. Furthermore, Friedman asks, why assume that a person's higher-level principles and values are indicative of what she really wants or values? In cases of oppressive socialization, an agent may reflectively endorse her thoroughly socialized higher-level principles and values, but it may be her apparently wayward first-order desires that are more indicative of what she really wants and values.

In response to these objections to hierarchical versions of the structural approach, Friedman proposes a nonhierarchical variant, which she calls an "integration" model. Instead of taking a "split-level" or "top-down" approach that favors higher-level assessment, in the integration model critical reflection is rather understood as a "two-way process of integration within a person's hierarchy of motivations, intermediate standards and values, and highest principles. Only if a person's highest principles have been subjected to assessment in accord with her intermediate standards and her motivations, would it be appropriate to consider them her 'own' principles."[39] Thus lower-level motivations provide the standpoint from which an agent can judge and critically evaluate her higher-order values and principles. According to Friedman, the autonomy-conferring status of critical reflection is secured because higher-level principles and values are assessed by reference to lower-level motivations and vice versa. Autonomy is achieved when the different levels of the self are integrated.

Friedman's integration model makes an important contribution toward understanding the effects of oppressive socialization on autonomy. In particular, it provides an explanation of the kind of self-alienation that characterizes failures of autonomy in oppressive social contexts. However, integration cannot provide a sufficient condition for autonomy. For, as Paul Benson points out, "An integration view detects threats to autonomy only when the total internalization of autonomy-inhibiting socialization fails to take hold or begins to break down."[40] Furthermore, Friedman's integration account, like other structural theories, takes a time-slice approach to autonomy and hence overlooks the historical processes of formation of the agent's beliefs, desires, values, and emotional attitudes.

Historical Models. In response to the problems arising from socialization that plague structural models, several philosophers, especially Gerald Dworkin and John

Christman, have introduced a historical dimension to analyses of autonomy. Dworkin argues that for critical reflection to be autonomy conferring, the processes of critical reflection must themselves be "procedurally independent."[41] Critical reflection must be understood as a capacity rather than as an occurrent state, a capacity that enables the agent to reflect on and critically assess the various processes (socialization, parental or peer influence, etc.) by means of which she came to acquire her desires, beliefs, values, and emotional attitudes. The agent is autonomous with respect to these processes if she endorses them.

John Christman argues that critical reflection yields autonomy when the processes of reflection have not been influenced by "illegitimate external influences."[42] Illegitimate external influences are those influences (for example, indoctrination, manipulation, brainwashing, and oppressive socialization) that interfere with agents' normal cognitive processes of reflection. Such influences are illegitimate if upon becoming aware of them as a result of critical reflection, the agent is led to revise her identifications. In a later article, Christman proposes a counterfactual analysis of autonomy in which a person is autonomous with respect to her values and higher-order identifications only if, upon becoming aware of the historical process through which she acquired them, she does not resist this process, or she *would* not resist it were she to become aware of it.[43] Both the illegitimate influences and the counterfactual conditions provide a compatibilist response to the problem of socialization. As long as our desires and preferences are not the products of illegitimate external influences, or that we do not or would not resist the way we came by these desires and preferences, they are autonomous.

However, there are at least two problems with Christman's analysis. First, it tends to equate autonomy with self-transparency. The more we are aware of the historical processes through which we acquired our desires, values, and so on, the more autonomous we will be. But if autonomy requires this kind of self-transparency, it is highly dubious that any of us are ever autonomous, for reasons that Thalberg points out. Second, although seeming too stringent from one perspective (requiring self-transparency), it is too weak from another because it allows agents whose processes of critical reflection are not autonomous to count as autonomous. Paul Benson points out that a person who has been thoroughly socialized to internalize certain norms, for example, the norms of feminine appearance, would be unlikely to revise her higher-order identifications as a result of critical reflection if she were to become aware that these identifications were the result of oppressive socialization.[44] It is not clear that such a person *would* modify either her identification with the desire to be attractive to men or her self-conception in which her sense of self-worth is tied to her physical appearance. Only an agent whose normal processes of reflection are *already* autonomous would be led to modify her identifications upon becoming aware that they are the result of socialization. The thoroughly socialized woman does not, or would not, resist these processes. Hence she counts as autonomous on Christman's view.

Whereas historical approaches thus draw attention to the importance of attending to the historical processes of belief-, desire-, and value-formation, they are nevertheless insufficient to grapple with the autonomy-impairing effects of oppressive socialization. Moreover, both the historical and structural versions of procedural

theories that *are* attentive to the implications of socialization for autonomy nevertheless tend to represent socialization in largely negative terms, as an obstacle, or threat, to autonomy. So whereas it is admitted that our values, beliefs, and desires, as well as our characters and life plans, are inevitably shaped by socialization, autonomy tends to be represented as the quest to shape an identity for oneself in the face of, or against, this influence. As a result, both structural and historical theorists have failed to analyze the differences between the kinds of socialization, or aspects of socialization, that promote autonomy and those that impede or undermine it. They have also neglected the question of what skills and capacities are necessary for autonomy and what kinds of socialization are necessary to promote these skills and capacities. Competency theories have to a large extent addressed this problem.

Autonomy Competency. Diana Meyers's theory of autonomy competency[45] is motivated by a concern both to explain the autonomy-impairing effects of oppressive socialization and to develop a theory that is able to explain how agents who are subject to oppressive social circumstances may nevertheless be partially autonomous, or autonomous in certain domains of their lives but not in others. She argues that autonomy is a competency comprising a cluster of different skills and capacities, in particular skills of self-discovery, self-direction, and self-definition, all of which involve reflection. Autonomy involves the capacity to exercise these skills to achieve an integrated but dynamic self. Thus the notion of integration plays an important role in Meyers's theory, as it does in Friedman's structural account.[46]

Meyers's theory might best be classified as a self-realization approach to autonomy.[47] Unlike Aristotelian versions of self-realization, however, which are premised on a normative notion of flourishing, Meyers's approach is procedural. Since individuals differ so significantly in their talents, capacities, character traits, values, desires, beliefs, and emotional attitudes, she argues, there can be no blueprint for what constitutes an autonomous life. Rather autonomy can be secured only through the exercise of autonomy competency, or a coordinated repertoire of skills and capacities that enable each individual to fully realize himself or herself, whatever self-realization amounts to for each particular individual.

Meyers's account is explicitly relational in that she argues that autonomy competency can be developed only in the context of social relationships, practices, and institutions. The social context is important to the development of autonomy competency for at least three reasons. First, self-realization does not require an agent to be able to develop or realize all of her potentialities; rather it involves the capacity to develop those potentialities that are central to the agent's authentic self-conception, in the context of the agent's life plan. Since different social environments encourage or foster the development of different potentialities in any individual, the agent's social environment is crucial to the agent's ability to recognize and develop her important potentialities. Second, the connection between self-realization and the social environment explains how an agent's attempts to develop an authentic self may be thwarted or compromised by that environment. Since agents are more likely to develop or emphasize those aspects of themselves (character traits, potentialities, and talents) that are socially reinforced and to incorporate these aspects into their self-concepts, the quest for authenticity may be undermined by conventionality. Third,

the social context may impair agents' capacities to achieve autonomy in a different way, namely, because certain kinds of socialization encourage the development of some of the skills that make up autonomy competency, at the expense of others. Patterns of gender socialization in contemporary Western cultures, for example, tend to encourage in women the skills involved in self-discovery because they encourage the development in women of emotional receptivity and perceptiveness. However, women are less likely to be encouraged to develop skills of self-direction and self-definition. It is precisely these skills that are more likely to be developed in men, at the expense of skills of self-discovery.

If autonomy competency comprises a range of skills that may be more or less developed, exercised, and coordinated, it makes sense to think of autonomy as a matter of degree. Hence Meyers distinguishes episodic autonomy from programmatic and narrowly programmatic autonomy. She argues that agents subject to oppressive socialization may exhibit high degrees of episodic autonomy, that is, the capacity to decide what one wants in weighing up one's desires or how to act in a particular situation. They may also exhibit narrowly programmatic autonomy, the capacity to make autonomous decisions in particular aspects of one's life, for example, choice of partner. Meyers's view is that women subject to traditional gender socialization are likely to exercise episodic or narrowly programmatic autonomy. However, their programmatic autonomy, their capacity to critically and reflectively decide major life issues such as whether or not to be a mother or whether to dedicate oneself to the pursuit of a career, is likely to be compromised. Like Rawls, Meyers sees self-realization as crucial to self-respect. If traditional gender socialization compromises women's capacities to achieve full autonomy and so damages their self-respect, this kind of socialization is oppressive.

Meyers's account aims to resolve a conundrum confronting feminist theorists, which she states in the preface to her book: "If women's professed desires are products of their inferior position, should we give credence to those desires? If so, we seem to be capitulating to institutionalized injustice by gratifying warped desires. If not, we seem to be perpetuating injustice by showing disrespect for those individuals."[48] Her answer to the conundrum is that not all desires should be afforded equal credence or weight. Autonomous desires, namely, those that express our "authentic selves," as developed through the exercise of skills of self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction, are more worthy of satisfaction than desires that merely reflect uncritical acceptance of social norms or expectations. The suggestion, then, is that it is not the *content* of so-called warped desires that renders them less worthy of satisfaction but the fact that they have not been acquired or endorsed autonomously. The question we wish to raise concerning Meyers's theory is whether her content-neutral approach to self-realization really does provide a satisfactory solution, from a feminist perspective, to this conundrum. In particular, could warped desires, or desires that arise as a result of oppressive socialization, ever be autonomous? Or does the content of certain desires and choices show that the deliberative processes involved just could not meet the conditions necessary for autonomy?[49] In other words, does the notion of autonomy competency implicitly rely on a more normative and substantive view of what is required for women to flourish or achieve full auton-

omy? Furthermore, does a feminist perspective on oppressive feminine socialization require more stringent normative conditions on autonomy? It is this second concern that has led some feminists to argue that the problem of oppressive socialization suggests the need for a more substantive approach to autonomy.

Substantive Theories of Autonomy

Procedural accounts implicitly assume that the content-neutral procedural conditions they identify are both necessary and sufficient for autonomy. It is here that recent work focusing especially on the articulation of the possibility of autonomy in oppressive circumstances has revealed a flaw in procedural theories. Such work shows that whereas some set of procedural conditions may indeed be necessary for autonomy, it is not sufficient. We call those theories that maintain that procedural accounts must be supplemented by some nonneutral condition *substantive* theories.[50] There are two basic categories of substantive accounts: *strong substantive* and *weak substantive.* The former reject the content neutrality of procedural theories by requiring specific contents of the autonomous preferences of agents. The latter reject content neutrality by suggesting further necessary conditions on autonomy that operate as constraints on the contents of the desires or preferences capable of being held by autonomous agents. Both kinds of accounts, in different ways, are responding to objections to procedural accounts that derive from socialization.

Strong Substantive Theories. Susan Wolf and Paul Benson have both defended strong substantive accounts of autonomy. (We discuss Benson's more recent weak substantive theory below.) The central idea of these strong substantive accounts is that of normative competence: to be autonomous, agents must be competent, or have the capacity, to identify the difference between right and wrong. Since certain kinds of socialization, including socialization due to oppression, interfere with this capacity, agents subject to this kind of socialization are not autonomous. Consider Wolf's account of JoJo, the son of an evil and sadistic tyrant.[51] JoJo is raised to be evil and sadistic like his father; as an adult, he respects his father's values and emulates his desires. His father's evil and sadistic worldview is thoroughly internalized by JoJo. Wolf argues that since JoJo identifies in the appropriate ways with his first-order desires, on hierarchical accounts he would count as autonomous. Yet she argues that he is not autonomous nor morally responsible for the actions performed on the basis of his evil values, for "it is unclear whether anyone with a childhood such as his could have developed into anything but the twisted and perverse sort of person that he has become."[52] Wolf argues that to be free and responsible, one has to be "sane." Although JoJo acts according to his own values and desires in the way required by hierarchical theories, he is nevertheless "insane"—and hence neither free nor morally responsible—because his upbringing has blocked his capacity to distinguish right from wrong. In her book *Freedom within Reason,* Wolf articulates the failure of autonomy here as a failure of a capacity to track an aspect of the world, namely, the moral or the right. Since for Wolf the demands of morality are equivalent to the demands of "Reason," to be autonomous, agents must be capable of dis-

cerning the requirements of Reason. Wolf's theory, therefore, is a new version of the traditional Kantian account of autonomy, in which autonomy is understood as the capacity for rational self-legislation.[53]

In several papers, Paul Benson has advocated a similar strong substantive account of autonomy.[54] As we have seen, he points out that inadequate or inappropriate socialization (as in the case of children), as well as oppressive socialization, can undermine agents' normative competence. In particular, oppressive socialization can lead to the acceptance of norms, which once internalized, block agents' capacities for detecting whether the norms are correct. For example, when women internalize norms purveyed by the fashion industry, such as those that treat personal value as being dependent on stereotypical feminine appearance, the typical effect is to undermine their capacity to criticize the norms. Since the stereotype suggesting that personal appearance is a component of self-worth presupposes a *false* norm, when women lose the capacity to criticize the norm effectively, and thereby lose the capacity to detect that it is incorrect, they lose autonomy with respect to the area of their lives that they take to be governed by the norm. Because both Wolf and Benson are proposing that a necessary condition of autonomy is the capacity to formulate desires and preferences and endorse values, with specific contents, their theories are strongly substantive.

Weak Substantive Theories. Benson has recently proposed a weaker normative competence theory. Consider the following passage from his article "Free Agency and Self-Worth":

> Imagine a feminist remake of *Gaslight* in which, as in the original, the female protagonist falls into a state of helplessness and disorientation as a result of a profound change in her view of herself. . . . [The husband] . . . is a physician . . . and regards women who are excitable, who have active imaginations and strong passions, and who are prone to emotional outbursts in public as suffering from a serious psychological illness. . . . The protagonist has the suspect traits, her husband makes the standard diagnosis, and the 'hysterical wife' ends up isolated, feeling rather crazy. . . . She arrives at her sense of incompetence and estrangement from her conduct on the basis of reasons that are accepted by a scientific establishment which is socially validated and which she trusts.[55]

Benson argues that neither structural nor historical procedural accounts explain the agent's apparent lack of autonomy in such a situation, for the agent satisfies the conditions offered by both accounts. What is lacking in such agents is a sense of worthiness to act, which "involves regarding oneself as being competent to answer for one's conduct in light of normative demands that, from one's point of view, others might appropriately apply to one's actions."[56] Lacking this sense of self-worth is quite compatible with agents retaining their "power to put [their] will into effect" and hence is quite compatible with agents retaining the capacities and undergoing the processes required by procedural theories. We are calling the type of condition offered by Benson *weakly substantive* because although it places constraints on the desires, preferences, and values that count as autonomous, it abandons the content specificity of strong substantive theories.[57] Similarly, Robin Dillon and Trudy Govier