

Studies in Feminist Philosophy

# Autonomy, Gender, Politics



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MARILYN FRIEDMAN

# AUTONOMY, GENDER, POLITICS

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Marilyn Friedman

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## **AUTONOMY, GENDER, POLITICS**

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To Elizabeth

## Preface

People are everywhere “reinventing” themselves. Social commentaries overflow with optimistic tales of creative self-reformation and self-renewal. Reinventing oneself is only the latest of many pop cultural tropes evoking the philosophical concept of personal autonomy. This resilient ideal reaches back to the origins of liberalism and shows no signs of an impending demise.

Traditionally, of course, autonomy has not been idealized for everyone. It has been emphasized much more for certain groups of men than for other groups of men or for any women. In Western liberal societies where the ideal has flourished, white men with middle- or upper-class pedigrees or ambitions have been more able than other social actors to lead autonomous lives. Canonical philosophers doubted that women had the requisite capacities for autonomy. Many social groups were prevented from living autonomously by systematic injustice, subordination, and oppression, conditions that have scarcely disappeared. The lingering force of these practices has prompted many feminists to view autonomy with suspicion and to challenge it as (white) male-biased. There is good reason when theorizing about autonomy to focus especially on a group for whom it has been historically inaccessible. This book focuses on women. If the case for the importance of autonomy can be made out with women in mind, it should be easier to make the case for others not so similarly dogged by past suppression.

Despite, or perhaps because of, those not-so-distant obstacles, autonomy, under various labels and in various guises, has long engrossed my attention. The ideas of living a life of “my own,” being “true to my heart,” standing up for “what I believe,” and doing it “my way,” have possessed an alluring plausibility. The usual provisos, of course, must apply: one should do others no harm and remain appropriately caring of them. Given those constraints, there is profound value, I believe, in the opportunity and the capacity to live according to one’s own sense of a life worth living. Recent philosophical criticisms of autonomy by detractors who regard it as antithetical to important values have

not, in the end, changed my mind. This book is partly a response to objections to autonomy, especially those grounded in sociopolitical, and not metaphysical, considerations.

The first chapter sets out my basic account of personal autonomy as a feature of choices and actions that reflect and are the result of wants, desires, cares, concerns, values, and commitments that the actor has reflectively reaffirmed and that she can sustain even in the face of some minimal opposition from others. The second chapter responds to various objections that have been raised to the coherence and meaningfulness of an ideal of personal autonomy such as this one. The third chapter presents an affirmative defense of autonomy. Taken together, these chapters provide the basic theoretical position of the book.

Each chapter of this book can be read independently of the others, especially the last six chapters. Chapters 4 and 5 investigate in greater depth a topic raised in the first three chapters, the social grounding of autonomy. Chapter 4 shows how feminist and mainstream philosophy have both been converging around this idea for some time. Chapter 5 develops a point made in preceding chapters that autonomy, although socially grounded, has an individualizing dimension, a dimension that I defend against the worries of critics. Chapters 6 and 7 study autonomy in regard to topics pertaining to intimate relationships: romantic love in chapter 6 and domestic violence in chapter 7. Chapters 8 and 9 look at autonomy in the wider realm of liberal theory, considering first John Rawls's recent approach to liberal political legitimacy (chapter 8) and then the policy question of how liberal states should deal with cultural minorities that appear to violate the rights of female members of those communities (chapter 9).

This book gestated for several years before finally emerging as a coherent whole. Over that time, I have talked with people too numerous to recall about the various issues in these pages. In accord with the by-now familiar contention of this book that autonomy is socially grounded, I know well how my own philosophical work has been nurtured by the arguments, insights, and imaginings of others and I am grateful to all of those persons. Alison Jaggar, Sara Buss, and Elizabeth Oljar, for example, each commented on an earlier, shorter version of one or another of these chapters at an American Philosophical Association meeting, and each asked perceptive questions that I hope I have answered. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar offered astute suggestions toward the revision of chapter 5 when I was preparing it for the volume they put together largely from the proceedings of a wonderful conference on autonomy and gender that they hosted at Australian National University in 1996. For several years, fertile ground for thought was provided by the St. Louis Autonomy Discussion Group, usually consisting of Joel Anderson, David Conway, Larry Davis, Sigurdur Kristinnsson, Thad Metz, and Eleanor Stump. Thanks also to Joel Anderson for those "autonomy lunches" that helped to launch this project. Audiences at American University, Arizona State University, Australian National University, University of Chicago, University



of Colorado, University of Illinois at Chicago, Hendrix College, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and the University of Western Ontario, as well as at meetings of the American Philosophical Association, the Feminist Ethics and Social Theory group (FEAST), and the Central States Philosophical Association all heard earlier versions of some of these chapters and made sober and discerning comments.

Thanks to Linda LeMoncheck for recruiting me for this exciting Oxford book series which I am proud to join. I am also greatly indebted to Peter Ohlin and Cheshire Calhoun for tolerating with infinite patience and grace my tardy completion of the manuscript and for ensuring its safe metamorphosis into book form.

Finally, and most of all, I thank my family for their essential support, without which I couldn't possibly have done it "my way." I am thrilled that Elizabeth shows every sign of being determined to live an autonomous life, such as I could only dream about at her age, and doing it with zest and imagination. Larry's readiness to talk about anything and everything is a constant source of wit and wisdom. My gratitude is boundless for these and other immeasurable treasures.

## Acknowledgments

Four of these chapters have been revised and reprinted from previously published versions. Chapter 4 first appeared in Diana Tietjens Meyers, ed., *Feminists Rethink the Self* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997), pp. 40–61. Chapter 5 first appeared in Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 35–51. Chapter 6 first appeared in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 22 (1998): 162–81. Chapter 8 first appeared in Victoria Davion and Clark Wolf, eds., *The Idea of a Political Liberalism: Essays on Rawls* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 16–33. For permission to reprint those papers, I am very grateful to the above journal and presses.

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## THE BASIC ACCOUNT



## A Conception of Autonomy

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Autonomy is a controversial value. Prized by some, scorned by others, it generates ongoing debate. Much of the controversy stems, no doubt, from ambiguity. Not everyone understands autonomy in the same way. What some value as autonomy may not be what others are criticizing. Yet even if all sides could agree on what autonomy meant, disagreement would not simply vanish. This book presents, defends, and applies one conception of the ideal of personal autonomy.

In the first chapter, I set out my basic account of autonomy. In the second and third chapters, I provide a defense of its importance, with special attention to its value for women. As the title of this book indicates, gender concerns permeate many of the discussions. In the fourth and fifth chapters, I explore some social dimensions of autonomy and of the conditions required for its realization. The sixth and seventh chapters deal with issues of autonomy in the context of intimate relationships. The eighth and ninth chapters consider the importance of autonomy in broader political realms involving the state.

In this chapter, after setting out my basic account of autonomy, I consider its social context and dimensions. After that I explore the difference between a substantive and a content-neutral conception of autonomy, opting for the latter. This is followed by some thoughts about the prospects for autonomy under dangerous or oppressive conditions. I conclude this chapter with some remarks about possible counterexamples to my views.

### The Basic Account

The term "autonomy" is largely a term of philosophic art, yet it encompasses an array of notions familiar to ordinary people, notions such as being "true to myself," doing it "my way," standing up for "what I believe," thinking "for myself," and, in gender-egalitarian reformulation, being one's "own person."

However unsystematic they might be, these ordinary notions of "folk" understanding provide touchstones for this project. They hint at an ideal that, while scarcely the only or even the supreme moral value, is nevertheless vital and momentous for a great multitude of human lives across many cultural boundaries and other human differences. This ideal of personal autonomy can be a particularly inspirational ideal for those who, in the course of living their lives, must cope with the all-too-familiar human wrongs of abuse, exploitation, domination, and oppression.

Autonomy is, of course, self-determination. Personal autonomy is self-determination by an individual self, a person. My account of autonomy revolves around a conception of what it is for choices and actions in particular to be autonomous. I sometimes refer to choices or actions indifferently as behavior.<sup>1</sup> Other autonomous phenomena may then be defined in terms of autonomous behavior. An autonomous person is someone who behaves autonomously with relative frequency. An autonomous life is one lived by an autonomous person.

Numerous distinctions are necessary when setting out an account of autonomy. One that is worth mentioning at the outset is that between the nature of autonomy itself, its constitutive conditions, and the causal conditions required for autonomy to be realized. The nature of autonomy itself consists of the conditions that choices and actions must meet in order to be autonomous. These conditions constitute autonomy. These are distinct from the causal conditions, both past and present, that must obtain for choices and actions to manifest the constitutive conditions in virtue of which they are autonomous. The distinction between the constitutive and the causal conditions required for autonomy will be particularly important for appreciating the role that social relationships and cultural context play in the realization of autonomy, a topic we shall turn to later in this chapter and again in chapters 4 and 5.

With these preliminaries in mind, we may now turn to the actual account. For choices and actions to be autonomous, the choosing and acting self as the particular self she is must play a role in determining them. The self as a whole, as the particular self she is, must somehow (partly) determine what she chooses and does. This could come about if the particular self that someone is has a distinctive identity and her identity is somehow implicated in her determining of what she does. The features constituting her identity must not simply cause her choices and actions as isolated links in causal chains. Rather, they must be features that are central enough to who someone is so that she herself, as a whole self, becomes somehow thereby a (part) cause of what she does through those centrally distinct features.

In recent decades, the notion of self-determination has been elaborated in terms of a certain sort of self-reflection that involves, one might say, self-monitoring and self-regulation.<sup>2</sup> According to a generic version of this view, to realize autonomy a person must first somehow reflect on her wants, desires, and so on and take up an evaluative stance with respect to them. She can endorse or identify with them in some way or be wholeheartedly committed to them, or she can reject or repudiate them or be only halfheartedly committed

to them. If she endorses or identifies with her wants and desires, she makes them more truly hers, more genuinely a part of who she is, and thus, more a part of her very identity as a particular, distinctive self than are the wants and desires that she has not thus self-reflectively reaffirmed. When she chooses or acts in accord with wants or desires that she has self-reflectively endorsed, and her endorsement is somehow a part cause of her behavior, then, according to this familiar generic account, she is behaving autonomously. When wants and desires lead to choice or action without having been self-reflectively endorsed by the person whose wants and desires they are, the resulting choices and actions are not autonomous. They are not self-determined; they have not been determined by the self as the whole distinctive self she is.

This generic conception of autonomy forms the basis of my own account. Self-reflection is the process in which, roughly, a whole self takes a stance toward particular wants and values she finds herself to have. Self-reflective reaffirmation brings the (whole) self into accord with some of those wants or values. A person's self-reflections give a crucial imprimatur to the wants and concerns on which they focus approvingly. Those wants and concerns become more truly a (whole) person's "own."

Autonomous choices and actions, on this account, are self-reflective in two senses. First, they are partly caused by a person's reflections on, or attentive consideration of, wants and desires that already characterize her. This attention need not have occurred closely prior to the occurrence of the choice or action. It may have occurred at some distantly past time. As well, reflective attention need not be conscious or extensive, and it need not be narrowly cognitive in nature. Without an attitude of reflective commitment, someone might still happen to express or promote various of her wants or values in her behavior. She would not be particularly self-determining, however, in regard to that behavior. Behavior on behalf of what one has not ever reconsidered does not, in any special way, involve a self, as the particular self one is, in determining one's behavior or the course of one's life. Only when one reflectively cares in some way about something, thereby reaffirming it and doing so as the distinctive person one is, does it become relevant for one's autonomy.

To realize autonomy, self-reflections must also be partly effective in determining someone's behavior. For self-reflection to be effective in practice, it must not be impeded by interfering conditions. Coercion, deception, and manipulation by others are the paradigm examples of conditions that interfere with the practical effectiveness of someone's self-reflections. They can distort someone's attempts to consider her options in light of what matters to her and to choose what genuinely reflects her own concerns. The choosing person is forced or pressured in those cases to choose other than what she would most want to pursue under the circumstances at hand and is led inappropriately to choose for the sake of values that would not otherwise have been her guiding priorities under those circumstances. Coercive conditions do not entirely preclude autonomy, a point I shall elaborate toward the end of this chapter. However, they typically undermine it to a significant degree. The extent to which they do so depends on how effective they are. What autonomy requires, then,



is the absence of *effective* coercion, deception, manipulation, or anything else that interferes significantly with someone's behaving in a way that reflects her wants and values as she would reflect on and reaffirm them under noninterfering conditions.

Autonomous choices and behavior must also be self-reflective in a second sense. They must reflect, or mirror, the wants, desires, cares, concerns, values, and commitments that someone reaffirms when attending to them. To mirror someone's concerns is to accord with them and, especially, to promote them. Choices and actions mirror wants and values by, for example, aiming at the attainment of what is wanted or valued, promoting its well-being, or protecting it from harm.

In this discussion, I use the full gamut of valenced attitude terms interchangeably and ignore subtle differences among them. Wants, desires, cares, concerns, values, commitments, and any other attitudes someone may take up with regard to what she experiences, attitudes that might influence her goals, purposes, aims, and intentions, are thereby relevant to autonomy. In the remainder of the discussion, for stylistic reasons, I generally use only two or three selected attitude terms at a time ("wants and values," for example). These abbreviated lists are always intended, however, as a stylistic convenience that stands in for the full panoply of "pro" or "con" attitudes that someone might hold deeply and that can be part causes of behavior that reflects the content of those attitudes.

Besides being self-reflective in these two senses, autonomous actions and choices also stem from what an agent cares deeply about. They stem from wants and values that are relatively important to the acting person. Relative importance for a particular person is a matter of depth and pervasiveness. Wants and values are "deep" when they are abiding and tend to be chosen over other competing wants and values. Wants and values are also deep when they constitute the overarching rationales that an agent regards as justifying many of her more specific choices. Wants and values are "pervasive" when they are relevant to a great many situations that a person faces. They are frequently salient in someone's life and she chooses in accord with them often. When someone reflectively reaffirms wants or values that are important to her in either sense just described, they become part of the perspective that defines her as the particular person she is. They embody the "nomos" of her self: relatively stable, enduring concerns and values that give her a kind of identity as the person she is. Someone is self-determining when she acts for the sake of what matters to her, what she deeply cares about, and, in that sense, who she "is."

Someone can, of course, reaffirm wants or desires that she regards as trivial in comparison to her other concerns, perhaps a liking for ice cream or a particular television program. However, it seems intuitively appropriate to say that someone lives her life "her way" as "her own person" only when she does so in accord with wants and values that she regards as important to her, and that in fact ground or pervade many of her concerns. Only in that way would they involve her self, as the distinctive self she is, in the choices she makes. It is her deeper concerns, not her shallower concerns, that provide the basis for au-