

Studies in Feminist Philosophy

# Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender



EDITED BY  
**Andrea Veltman**  
**Mark Piper**

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and  
Mark Piper

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## Introduction

Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper

If feminism is a response to the oppression of women, and if resistance and emancipation include living according to one's own lights, then autonomy is central to issues in feminist philosophy. Classically defined as self-determination, autonomy includes the ability to shape our own lives and to live authentically rather than being directed by external forces that manipulate or distort us.<sup>1</sup> Some influential accounts define autonomy as requiring a process of critical self-reflection, whereas others emphasize several agential competencies, values, or self-regarding attitudes. Still others argue that autonomy requires control over one's circumstances, a range of options that one can hope to achieve in the development of her life, and a lack of severe constraint, coercion, or subordination in which one would be subject to the dictates of others.<sup>2</sup> Each of these kinds of accounts of autonomy can recognize the social and relational character of human agency, and each can acknowledge that autonomous abilities can be undermined by severely oppressive social forces, for instance by stifling the development of critical intellectual faculties or by blocking life options among the oppressed.

Autonomy provides not only an emancipatory ideal for those who cope with systemic abuse, degradation, domination, or other forms of oppression but also a lens for illuminating philosophical issues surrounding women's desires, choices, and identities. Feminist philosophers working in this area ponder, for instance, whether women can freely or authentically accept conditions that support their own oppression. Should we give credence to reflectively endorsed desires and choices that are the result of socially subordinate positions? Is the pursuit of desires that issue from patriarchal norms consistent with autonomous agency? What do we say about women who are willingly self-abnegating or wholly deferential to the interests of others? An analysis

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<sup>1</sup> As characterized by John Christman, "Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, August 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Marina Oshana, "Personal Autonomy in Society," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29:1 (Spring 1998): 81-102; Oshana, *Personal Autonomy in Society* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006).

of autonomy serves crucially in illuminating these and related questions, informing evaluations of women who adopt symbols of gender oppression, who define themselves through unequal personal relationships, or who harm themselves or others in conforming to cultural norms.

Autonomy plays an important role not only in feminism but also, more broadly, in ethical theory, applied ethics, political philosophy, and the philosophy of education. In the area of ethical theory, it has been argued that autonomy is integral in living well—that is, that autonomy is one primary good among others that a person needs to lead a good life or to achieve human flourishing. Autonomy also supports such basic human values as dignity, respect, truthfulness, and moral responsibility: in the vein of Kant, mature and rational human beings are seen as free and responsible moral agents in virtue of our capacities to control ourselves through the exercise of our autonomous wills. In applied ethics, autonomy informs ever-burgeoning debates on issues surrounding, for example, abortion, birth, physician-assisted suicide, and same-sex marriage. A principle of respect for autonomy also lies at the core of liberal democracies, and political philosophers often invoke autonomy in evaluating social and political principles and political power as well as in grounding individual rights or in criticizing paternalistic policies or practices. Since enhancing autonomy ranks among the most important goals of a free society, some also argue that promoting autonomy is among the most important goals of a liberal education.<sup>3</sup> These branches of philosophical interest in autonomy intertwine with feminist work on autonomy, as issues involving gender and oppression deeply permeate ethical and political philosophy.

Insofar as liberal democracies value individual autonomy, ideals of autonomy provide norms for critiquing oppressive practices that stifle agency and limit opportunities. If living autonomously requires an agent to have “a significant array of opportunities to act in ways that reflect what deeply matters to her,” as Marilyn Friedman writes, then social conditions “should not so limit her options that she cannot choose or act for the sake of any of her deep values and commitments.”<sup>4</sup> Oppression not only limits opportunities and life options, thus preventing an oppressed person from acting autonomously in ways that reflect her values and commitments, but also deforms desires and infects “the conditions under which growing persons are socialized.”<sup>5</sup> Oppressive socialization can damage a person’s concern for herself and stifle the development of cognitive capacities, such as those employed in self-reflection or the critical appraisal of social norms.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the importance of autonomy in normative philosophy, see Mark Piper, “Autonomy: Normative,” in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, December 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, 19.

Classically defined as a weighing down or as harsh dominion, oppression is characterized in contemporary feminist philosophy as structural or systemic in nature. In her landmark feminist analysis of oppression, Marilyn Frye writes that it encompasses “a system of interrelated barriers and forces which reduce, immobilize and mold people who belong to a certain group, and effect their subordination to another group.”<sup>6</sup> Others add that oppression presents multiple faces, including marginalization, exploitation, and powerlessness, and extends beyond economic and political forces to include psychological barriers that reduce, limit, or mold people as members of certain groups.<sup>7</sup> Ann Cudd also clarifies that, by means of physical violence, economic domination, and psychologically coercive forces, oppression is essentially “an institutionally structured harm perpetrated on groups by other groups,” in which a privileged social group benefits from the harm endured by the oppressed.<sup>8</sup>

Oppression can distort or damage the self-conception of an oppressed person, alienating her from her authentic self and further molding her into subordinate positions. As Sandra Bartky highlights in her work on the psychological dimensions of oppression, an oppressed person can come not only to adopt desires and values that are not her own but also to hold beliefs about herself that reflect social positions of inferiority: “to be psychologically oppressed is to be weighed down in your own mind; it is to have a harsh dominion exercised over your self-esteem.”<sup>9</sup> The oppressed internalize a message of inferiority, as when, for instance, women are regarded by others and come to regard themselves as childlike, as cheap labor, or as objects for the gaze or sexual pleasure of others.<sup>10</sup> As Michael Walzer writes in conveying another example from working life, “When a garbage-man feels stigmatized by the work he does... the stigma shows in his eyes. He enters ‘into collusion with us to avoid contaminating us with his lowly self.’ He looks away; and we do too. ‘Our eyes do not meet. He becomes a non-person.’”<sup>11</sup> To feel oneself inferior or to feel oneself worthless as a person poses a threat to autonomy by undermining self-respect, which is necessary for the realization of autonomous agency on some accounts.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1983), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Sandra Bartky, “On Psychological Oppression” and Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression” reprinted in *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, edited by Ann Cudd and Robin Andreasen (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Ann Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26, cf. 23–27.

<sup>9</sup> Bartky, “On Psychological Oppression,” 105.

<sup>10</sup> Bartky, “On Psychological Oppression,” 106, 112.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 176. Walzer here cites Stewart E. Perry’s *San Francisco Scavengers: Dirty Work and the Pride of Ownership* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 7.

<sup>12</sup> As Joel Anderson and Axel Honneth write, practices that confer denigration or humiliation threaten “self-esteem by making it much harder (and, in limit cases, even impossible) to think of oneself as worthwhile. The resulting feelings of shame and worthlessness threaten one’s sense that there is

In thinking about autonomy and gender oppression, it is important to recognize at the start that autonomy has “long been coded masculine,” as Jane Dryden writes.<sup>13</sup> Given historical and ideological exclusions of women from ideals of autonomy, some feminist philosophers have looked askance at conceptions of autonomy, at times rejecting the value altogether. One classic criticism, in circulation since the 1980s, is that autonomy is drawn from male biographies and bound up with socially atomistic and individualistic conceptions of human beings, such that autonomy is antithetical to the personal connections and social bonds around which many women reflectively form self-identities. In this earlier wave of feminist scholarship on autonomy, basic questions asked by philosophers concern whether autonomy requires self-sufficiency at the expense of human connections, whether women find the ideal of autonomy alienating, and whether feminine or feminist moral concerns require different conceptions of autonomy, relative to those that have been dominant in the history of philosophy or in contemporary moral and political philosophy.

This skeptical stance toward classic ideals of autonomy forms part of the starting point for work on relational conceptions of autonomy, in which feminist philosophers rehabilitate autonomy to accommodate the social character of human agency. Accounts of relational autonomy draw attention to the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which agents are embedded and to the fact that autonomy is a capability of human agents who are not only rational but also “emotional, embodied, desiring, creative and feeling.”<sup>14</sup> Those who offer accounts of relational autonomy also analyze the effect of oppressive socialization upon human agency and underscore that autonomy should not be cast as antithetical to human connections, including those manifested in love, friendship, appropriate care, and even loyalty and devotion.

Feminist accounts of relational autonomy have now changed the landscape of autonomy studies, shifting philosophical thinking about autonomy toward the social and interpersonal dynamics that shape agency, desires, and choices.<sup>15</sup> Feminist scholarship has focused attention on the need for a finer and richer account of agency, and there is now a fair amount of agreement that autonomous agency is saturated with self–other relations. As Friedman notes,

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point to one’s undertakings. And without that sense of one’s aspirations being worth pursuing, one’s agency is hampered.” Anderson and Honneth, “Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition and Justice,” in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, edited by John Christman and Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 131.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Dryden, “Autonomy: Overview,” in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, November 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, “Introduction: Autonomy Refigured,” in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self*, edited by Mackenzie and Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21; Natalie Stoljar, “Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2013.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., John Christman, “Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy.”

philosophical conceptions of autonomy—as opposed to conceptions of autonomy that may be culturally dominant—now seldom suggest that autonomy requires a self-sufficient or self-made person.<sup>16</sup> Adaptive preferences formed in the context of oppressive circumstances, such as preferences for subservience or for iconic symbols of gender oppression, also now serve as formidable potential counterexamples to purely proceduralist accounts of autonomy, which typically hold that an agent's autonomy in relation to a commitment is secured merely by the agent's endorsement of it, assuming the agent's reflection is suitably independent.

Since the publication of the landmark collection *Relational Autonomy* in 2000, feminist philosophers and autonomy scholars have continued debate over the conditions necessary for autonomous choice, the satisfactoriness of value-neutral accounts of autonomy, and the respect-worthiness of preferences formed in adaptive contexts, among other issues. For instance, in developing feminist accounts of autonomy, some theorists maintain that women who act subserviently or upon preferences formed in oppressive circumstances are not autonomous.<sup>17</sup> Others, however, argue that respecting the agency and deliberative capacities of oppressed women requires that we not characterize such women as “compliant dupes of patriarchy”<sup>18</sup> and that women living in severely oppressive conditions find outlets for the exercise of autonomy.<sup>19</sup> Both lines of argument initially appear plausible: as Diana Meyers observes, value-neutral accounts of autonomy, in which autonomy does not require choosing particular values, such as equality or independence, appear attractive partly on account of showing respect for women who choose subservience or deference. On the other hand, value-saturated accounts appear attractive on account of highlighting the autonomy-subverting costs of living under oppressive systems.<sup>20</sup>

In *Gender in the Mirror*, Meyers notes that both value-neutral and value-saturated accounts of autonomy are troubling: value-saturated accounts appear to stigmatize some women as victims, to homogenize autonomous and

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<sup>16</sup> Marilyn Friedman, “Autonomy, Social Disruption and Women,” in *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*, edited by Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008). See also Friedman's chapter “Relational Autonomy and Independence” in this volume.

<sup>17</sup> Natalie Stoljar, “Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition,” in Mackenzie and Stoljar, *Relational Autonomy*.

<sup>18</sup> Uma Narayan, “Minds of Their Own: Choices, Autonomy, Cultural Practices and Other Women,” in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> John Christman, “Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism, and the Social Construction of Selves,” *Philosophical Studies* 117 (2004): 143–164; Andrea Westlund, “Rethinking Relational Autonomy,” *Hypatia* 24 (2009): 26–49; Serene J. Khader, *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002), 11.



authentic lives, and to overlook the agency women exercise even in contexts of oppressive circumstances. Yet value-neutral accounts serve poorly as tools of social critique and suffer on account of packing autonomy into purely procedural processes of reflection that effectively “neglect the possibility that a well-integrated, smoothly-functioning self could be in need of rigorous scrutiny and drastic overhaul.”<sup>21</sup> In light of potential pitfalls of both approaches, Meyers argues that a compelling feminist account of autonomy “must acknowledge that oppression impedes autonomy without stripping women of that autonomy which they have managed to wrest from a patriarchal, racist, heterosexist, ageist, class-stratified world.”<sup>22</sup> In her contribution to this volume, she further distinguishes ways values enter autonomy theories, demarcating new conceptual axes along which to position accounts of autonomy.

In this collection of new papers, leading scholars carry forward examinations of central theoretical and practical issues at the intersection of autonomy studies and feminist philosophy. Contributors examine fundamental components and commitments of autonomy, examining for instance the role of reflective deliberation, reasons, values, cares, emotions, self-worth, self-care, adaptive preferences, social and political commitments, and norms of independence in accounts of autonomy. Some papers pursue the question of whether autonomy is compatible with subordination, including forms of gender subordination and class-based subordination. Others examine how ideals of autonomy are affected by capitalism, political commitments to inclusivity, and feminist emphases on the relationality of human agency. In looking at autonomy amid oppression, the volume represents a plurality of perspectives about autonomy. Some contributors examine the agency of women and oppressed persons through the lens of value-neutral accounts of autonomy, whereas others utilize dialogical accounts, capabilities accounts, or thicker value-saturated accounts. Still others make meta-arguments about the merits of different kinds of approaches relative to feminist ambitions. A number of papers focus on assessing autonomy in social contexts in which agents form adaptive preferences or internalize gendered norms, and some focus on how autonomy bears in social and personal contexts of raising girls, working, pregnancy and abortion, and end-of-life decisions.

We have organized the papers in the volume into five sections, beginning with an initial cluster that explores key dimensions of the concept of autonomy, especially in regards to its relational character and associated notions of independence and freedom. In Chapter 2, Catriona Mackenzie focuses on the concept of autonomy itself. According to Mackenzie, one of the key reasons that autonomy remains a contested value is because philosophers have tended to

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<sup>21</sup> Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror*, 16.