

Autonomy and Identity

The politics of who we are

Ros Hague



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Autonomy and Identity

Autonomy and identity are key concepts in both political and feminist thought and have played central roles in both fields. Although there has been much academic work on both concepts, there has arguably been little that has addressed the connections between autonomy and identity.

Autonomy and Identity seeks to draw innovative links between these concepts in order to develop a new understanding that sees autonomy as a process by which we change and develop our identity. It draws on thinkers from the canon of political thought such as G.W.F. Hegel, Mary Wollstonecraft, J.S. Mill and Simone de Beauvoir and features illustrative examples drawn from a wide range of contemporary issues including pornography, domestic violence and women's citizenship. Hague argues that identity is best understood as changing, multiple and something we need to take control of ourselves. In order to support this version of identity there needs to be a concept of autonomy which emphasizes self-direction to control our identity.

Providing valuable insight into the complexities of thinking about linking autonomy to identity, this book will be of interest to students and scholars of political science, gender studies, contemporary political thought and the history of political thought.

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The politics of who we are

Ros Hague

**To the memory of my mother and for my father – the first
feminist I encountered**

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Introduction

This book is about autonomy and identity. It attempts to discover what aspects of autonomy best accommodate the multiple and changing identities we all have. Autonomy is important to identity because it offers the prospect of taking control of identity and the means for self-definition. It is hoped that the concept of autonomy developed in this book will be able to enrich theorizing on autonomy in both feminist and mainstream political theory. In order to develop such a concept, this book looks at arguments both for individuality – as a means of developing independent identity – but also at community and the impact this has on our identity and autonomy. Our identities are inevitably influenced by our surroundings so we need to be sure our identities are authentic (an expression of who we want to be, not an imposition from our social surroundings). We can never be fully authentic, but we can struggle towards authenticity, an important part of which struggle is control. If we can control our identity, rather than have others control it, then we have a better prospect for authentic identity. This book emphasizes control as central to the concept of autonomy: we need to be in control of our own identity rather than having it controlled for us. We need to be in control of our identity but we are not isolated beings and any emphasis on control is in the context of our intersubjectivity.

There is a need for this concept of autonomy to strike a balance between independence and community if it is to be useful for identity. We want our identity to be recognized, but recognition is reciprocal and we need to recognize others. Reciprocal recognition is important to my concept of autonomy because it offers the opportunity (through thinking about the agency we need for our own autonomy) of seeing how our identity is bound to that of others. The following five themes are integral to the concept of autonomy for which this book argues: first, autonomy is understood as a process and as something that could be both gained and lost (autonomy can progress and regress); second, recognition, which encompasses both inner recognition (self-recognition) and outer recognition (reciprocal recognition); third, self-control, which is important to autonomy, but which is also seen as connected to the threat of social control; fourth, there is an attempt to reclaim autonomy from masculinity – especially the assumption that the choice we have is a dichotomous one between being autonomous and heteronomous, rational and natural, and there is, therefore, a relational aspect to

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autonomy; finally, autonomy is understood as thriving, flourishing, dynamic and not as stagnant, conformist, immanent and passive.

Autonomy is an interesting and valuable concept both for feminism and for mainstream political thought as it offers the means for liberation on personal and collective levels. Much of this liberation involves taking control of our own lives and gaining the ability to be the people we want to be. My interest in autonomy was sparked by reading John Stuart Mill's (unusually) passionate claims for self-direction, independence and self-development. These claims must apply to feminism which I see as a movement that has fostered both individual and collective development by encouraging not only women, but everyone whose lives were, and unfortunately still are, blighted by the domination of white, rich men. Although Kant is frequently associated with the liberal tradition, Mill's version of autonomy was more appealing than Kant's because, for Kant, autonomy involves following universal laws. A concept of autonomy such as mine, which attempts to encourage individuality, diversity and is open to the prospect of change, would struggle with Kant's universal moral law. It would also be problematic as my concept of autonomy aims to be feminist, to give women space to develop their identity rather than conforming to social stereotypes. It argues, therefore, against a universal position or identity for women. The danger of claiming a universal standpoint for women is that it obscures inequalities other than gender. For example, standpoint feminism, as developed by Nancy Hartsock (Hartsock 1985), appreciates that women are oppressed by men and by patriarchy, but it cannot recognize the way in which it is a view maintained through a homogeneous stance against women's oppression by white, middle-class heterosexual and able-bodied women. Because Mill focuses on individuality rather than universal applicability, his theory is more suitable for a feminist concept of autonomy than that of Kant.

Further research into other political theorists who deal with autonomy revealed a high level of abstraction with somewhat mechanistic descriptions of autonomy (Gerald Dworkin and Harry Frankfurt, for example), and also concepts of autonomy which derive from discussions surrounding contemporary issues of justice that appear to treat autonomy as a resource to be distributed in a just society. Neither approach appeared to respond to the question of identity and the seeming opposition between belonging and independence which appeared to trouble feminist theory. Identity is dealt with by theorists such as Iris Marion Young who argue for recognition of women and of differences between groups, but her argument is firmly within the realm of collective identity and, additionally, is based on ideas about theories of justice as she argues for just and equal recognition of social groups (Young 1990). Therefore her arguments did not answer my questions about autonomy and identity. A different feminist approach can be found in the work of Judith Butler, which addresses the problem of patriarchal distortion of identity. Butler's work on Simone de Beauvoir and the social construction of identity is useful for thinking about women's identity. However, Butler's conceptualization of agency appears somewhat restrictive for the way in which I would like to connect autonomy to identity. What follows is a brief discussion of why this is so.

Butler sees the subject as constituted by a process of signification and resignification: 'the subject is an accomplishment regulated and produced in advance' (Butler 1995a: 47). Her concern is with the way in which some subjects are created to the exclusion of others, and her aim is to draw attention to the authority of the subject who is acknowledged as such, and the denial of those who are Others rather than subjects (ibid.: 49). She points out that all identity categories are 'normative and as such, exclusionary' (ibid.: 51), and she asks

To what extent do *regulatory practices* of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person?... In other words, the 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility.

(Butler 1999: 23)¹

The category of 'woman' is, then, socially constructed and, consequently, has no internal feature of the person to offer for philosophical inquiry. Therefore, theories that attempt to begin from the premise of an agent are fruitless because we do not know what constitutes an agent; we only know what (society) constructs as an agent. There can be no 'recourse to an "I" that pre-exists signification' (Butler 1999: 183).

Gender is 'not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted through time, instituted in an exterior space through the *stylized repetition of acts*' (ibid.: 179).² The locus of agency is, according to Butler, a groundless 'ground' (ibid.: 179). Butler's subject does not have agency in the traditional liberal voluntarist understanding of acting on her will. However, agency can be found in gender, and gender is 'a "doing" – an activity – not one undertaken by a subject "that might be said to pre-exist the deed" ... Indeed, it is the "doing" that produces the gendered subject' (Lloyd 2007: 42).³ This brings us to Butler's famous claim, borrowed from Nietzsche, that there is no 'doer behind the deed'. Butler adds to this that 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler 1999: 33). The assertion that the deed constructs the doer leads Butler to say that gender identity is performative. This is a useful claim in that it highlights the impossibility of claiming one gender identity for all women; for Butler, the act of universalizing the category 'woman' is to fall into the trap of patriarchal law. We may think of gender as being an internal feature, but it is manufactured by 'a sustained set of acts' (ibid.: xv).

However, Butler's notion of agency is problematic for the concept of autonomy advanced in this book. According to Butler, gender attributes are either expressive or performative (ibid.: 180). Either the agent expresses herself through gender or the expressions acted out tell us the gender of the agent. Identity is either constructed through our actions (performative) or prior to our actions where our actions express our identity (expressive). If gender is understood as performative, then this does make the 'deed' construct the 'doer'.

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In her essay, 'Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance', Seyla Benhabib criticizes Butler's idea of performativity, in particular the notion that there can be no doer behind the deed. Benhabib concedes that the subject is influenced by culture, but she argues that subjectivity is the telling of who we are:

we are in the position of author and character at once. The situated and gendered subject is heteronomously determined but still strives toward autonomy. I want to ask how in fact the very project of female emancipation would even be thinkable without such regulative principle on agency, autonomy and selfhood?

(Benhabib 1995a: 20–1)

Her question is, how do we change the gender-based oppression of women by taking away any sense of selfhood? Butler, Benhabib says, follows Nietzsche in presenting the self as 'a masquerading performer, except of course we are now asked to believe that there is no self behind the mask' (ibid.: 21–2). In reply, Butler argues that Benhabib has misread the meaning of performativity. For Butler, there is no doer behind the deed which means there is no performer giving a performance, there is no agency prior to the act; the performance of the act is an opportunity to subvert the constitution of the self. Accordingly, subjects are linguistically constituted through a culture riddled with patriarchy: when we speak of ourselves as an 'I', the 'I' to which we refer is created within a patriarchal power structure, and the language that constitutes that 'I' is patriarchal and oppressive. However, the opportunity to alter the nature of the 'I' comes through performativity, a process of resignification which alters what it means to be that 'I'. A subject reiterates the norms and conventions which constitute it again and again (Butler 1995b: 135). There is no acting subject behind all of this; the subject is the result of this process of repeated signification and resignification until subversion is reached.

Benhabib admits that she misread *Gender Trouble* and that 'by performativity Butler does not mean a theatrical but a speech-act model' (Benhabib 1995b: 109). However, she remains critical of Butler's approach to agency and asks:

what normative vision of agency follows from, or is implied by this theory of performativity? Can the theory account for the capacities of agency and resignification it wants to attribute to individuals, thus explaining not only the constitution of the self but also the resistance that this self is capable of in the face of power/discourse regimes?

(Benhabib 1995b: 111)

Moya Lloyd explains Benhabib's criticism of Butler thus: 'While herself acknowledging that the self is 'situated' in a specific historical and cultural context, Benhabib nevertheless believes that it can act to change its conditions ... the performative subject is fully determined. It has no scope for autonomous

action' (Lloyd 2007: 59). This criticism of Butler demonstrates why Butler's notion of agency is not suitable for the concept of autonomy which will be advanced here. If autonomy is a process by which we change and develop our identities, then there has to be a capacity to change our identity; even oppressive identities can be altered but to do this we need agency. Of course, oppression can limit and, indeed, thwart agency, but mine is a concept of autonomy by degrees. Therefore, we may experience some identities as limiting or oppressive, but we are all multifaceted beings and we have many identities upon which we can draw. For my concept of autonomy, the individual needs to be able to 'determine' her future for herself and 'make normative judgements about the nature of the oppression' suffered (ibid.: 59).

Lloyd argues that the subject is not determined (therefore without agency), but rather is constituted. By constitution Lloyd means

the need perpetually to reproduce the gestures and styles of the flesh that generate gender as an effect. Crucially, it is in this compulsion to repeat these gestures and styles that agency resides. Agency is not, therefore, a property of the subject (an innate quality it has); it is, rather, an element of signification and repetition.

(Lloyd 2007: 61)

Therefore, the subject is not determined: it has agency through the process of constitution. However, Lloyd argues that Butler's account of agency is also not a voluntaristic one.⁴ The subject that is dominated by power is a subject that can act: 'at the moment the individual is subjected to gender norms, he or she becomes a gendered subject who can resist those norms' (Lloyd 2007: 64–5); the resistance of these norms comes through a process of citation, the repetition of norms in order to subvert gender. However, for my concept of autonomy, such subversion seems impossible without recourse to agency as a property of the subject, without agency as something which one has and can deploy in the process of resisting norms. Agency gives us direction and it gives us a degree of control over our identity; without this, we do not have the capacity to shape and mould our own identity to any degree whatsoever. Without agency as an innate quality belonging to us, the repetition of gender norms strikes me as lacking direction: we do not necessarily subvert oppressive identities by repeating them, and, indeed, we could be re-enforcing them by doing this. Resisting oppressive identity through subverting those identities can work, but to do so we need agency to choose which identities we subvert and which identities we embrace. We do not always have much control over this, but, when we do, when we choose to subvert oppressive identity, then we need recourse to agency because it is part of the process of changing and developing our identity.

I referred earlier to Butler's argument that there is no doer behind the deed, and, again, the 'I' to which we refer is created within a patriarchal power structure. The 'I', the subject, is linguistically constituted and is shaped by the loaded language we use to speak of the subject, to reiterate the subject. This suggests a

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wider concern with Butler's approach for my concept of autonomy and that concern is the way in which Butler conceives normative identity as being largely produced through language, and resistance to this is to be achieved through the repetition and resignification of these norms. It is through language that we understand the subject, suggesting a strong reliance on language as the main site of oppression and ultimately of resistance. Lois McNay argues that agency in Butler 'is conceived primarily as a property of linguistic structures rather than of individuals engaged in the world' (McNay 2008: 169). Against Butler, McNay asserts that the way in which normative identities are reproduced 'cannot be understood simply as a question of positioning within language but as a lived social relation that necessarily involves the negotiation of conflict and tension' (ibid.: 169). For McNay, Butler's account is both one dimensional, it binds agency to one identity (that of sexuality), and agency is presented as the property of language:

The idea of discourse construes agency in an objectivist manner as primarily a property of language rather than of subjects engaged in the world. This objectivism not only produces a narrowly sexualized account of agency but it also forecloses exploration of subjective dimensions to action, such as intention and understanding, which are crucial, *inter alia*, to assessing its political implications.

(McNay 2008: 166–7)

McNay's reading of Butler gets to the heart of the problem of agency – agency needs to be conceptualized as something we do in a social context, not just within the realm of language. In addition, the point that there is no 'subjective dimension to action' in Butler's theory is deeply problematic for a concept of autonomy such as mine which seeks to present the agent as striving for a degree of control over her identity. In order to do this, to some extent agency needs to be construed as the property of the subject for how else can an agent claim her identity as her own? Oppressive identities affect the individual deeply to the extent of altering both her self-perception and how she is perceived by others, but this suggests that we require a more robust sense of agency which allows the individual to be able to see her identity as her own.

Butler's claims that gender is socially constructed are insightful and useful for interrogating the connections between autonomy and identity. Oppressive identities restrict autonomy, but the response to this should be to conceptualize autonomy as something the agent has, reflecting, as McNay argues, significant features such as intention and understanding. My concept of autonomy requires a notion of a self with agency, a self who is capable of thinking about how to alter her identity. As Marilyn Friedman argues, the project of thinking about autonomy requires us to 'inhabit the discursive space in which selves are taken for granted' (Friedman 2003: 35) and these selves have the features to which McNay refers. Identities that oppress are given strength through language but autonomy resides in the capacities of the individual to change and develop her