

Marina A. L. Oshana, editor  
*Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression: Philosophical Perspectives*  
New York and London: Routledge, 2015  
ISBN 978-0-415-84013-2

Serene Khader (CUNY, Brooklyn)

**Serene J. Khader** holds the Jay Newman Chair in Philosophy of Culture at Brooklyn College and is Associate Professor of Women's Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. She is the author of *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment* (Oxford, 2011) as well as a number of articles on autonomy under conditions of oppression. She is currently at work on a book on transnational feminist ethics.

\*\*\*\*\*

Autonomy is a crucial value for anti-oppression theorizing. Understanding what autonomy is and why it is valuable is useful in both diagnosing the distinctive harms of oppression and developing strategies for overcoming it. The essays in *Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression* begin from the assumption that an appropriately formulated conception of autonomy can make important but undertheorized harms of oppression more visible. .

This point of departure is a testament to the significant advances feminist autonomy theory has made in the last fifteen years. Early feminist discussions of autonomy tended to cluster around two debates: whether feminists should value autonomy at all and, if so, whether they should conceive of autonomy in a value-laden or value-neutral fashion. The first debate grappled with autonomy's perceived origin in an androcentric and individualistic social ontology. The second asked whether feminists could plausibly see the mechanisms by which women's oppression-perpetuating preferences were formed as autonomous. The essays in *Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression* show that feminists now have at their disposal, and are working to further develop, analytical tools for transcending these debates.

The authors demonstrate a broad consensus that feminists should value a form of autonomy that allows women to resist *oppressive* relationships, rather than relationships as such. Many of the essays in the book, such as contributions by Paul Benson, Suzy Killmister, Catriona Mackenzie, and Natalie Stoljar, move beyond the terms of the procedural/substantive autonomy debate by identifying multiple axes or constituents of autonomy and/or arguing that multiple forms of autonomy are important in the lives of the oppressed. For instance, Mackenzie distinguishes among self-authorization, self-governance, and self-determination. She argues that a conception of autonomy that differentiates along these axes can explain why women with adaptive preferences are worthy of respect and why they should be seen as lacking autonomy. Mackenzie articulates her essay as a response to my work on adaptive preferences, in which I claim that procedural autonomy deficiency is not a defining characteristic of adaptive preferences. According to Mackenzie, we must acknowledge that oppression

characteristically denies women self-determination and self-authorization. We can capture my claim about oppressed people often possessing procedural autonomy by claiming that adaptive preferences need not entail deficits in *self-governance*. Mackenzie offers a nuanced conception of autonomy, and her explicit acknowledgment that substantive autonomy theorists need to confront worries about overriding women's existing desires makes it an important contribution to the substantive autonomy literature.

Similarly, Suzy Killmister understands autonomy to have three distinct dimensions: self-definition, external self-realization, and internal self-realization. Understanding autonomy as having these dimensions allows Killmister to argue that a specific form of adaptation to oppression that may appear autonomy-enhancing is actually autonomy-undermining. The form of adaptation Killmister is interested in occurs when agents face double binds. Double binds are situations in which, to use Marilyn Frye's words, any option will expose an agent to "censure or deprivation." One way that an agent can respond to such double binds is by endorsing the conditions that produce them. For instance, a woman may respond to the double bind that says she must choose between having children and professional advancement by making herself believe that women should just be homemakers and stop "trying to have it all." Killmister worries that, without a sufficiently nuanced understanding of autonomy, it will seem that such self-modification is autonomy-enhancing. To neutralize this worry, Killmister claims that self-modification, even if it promises to harmonize internal and external realization, undermines self-definition. It undermines self-definition by precluding consistency between the agent's beliefs and the rest of her "epistemic and practical commitments." To begin to believe that one should not try to have it all, a woman must not only rid herself of that specific belief; she must rid herself of all commitments that may conflict with it. Attempting to achieve self-realization through self-modification almost inevitably compromises self-definition. According to Killmister, understanding self-determination as placing demands of consistency on us avoids many of the problems associated with substantive theories of autonomy. Whether this ultimate claim is persuasive, it adds nuance to our understandings of women's relationships to oppressive norms.

Killmister concludes by admitting that self-modification is sometimes at odds with values other than autonomy, such as integrity. This final point is indicative of a larger set of questions raised by the book: about the relationship between autonomy and other, related values. In the same volume where Killmister and Mackenzie argue that self-governance is a part of autonomy, Marina Oshana argues that self-authorization "is something other than autonomy." Oshana claims this in response to critics of her constitutively relational conception of autonomy, in which a person is autonomous only if certain life opportunities are available to her. It is often charged against Oshana's view that it cannot capture two important intuitions. The first is that leaders of social movements on behalf of oppressed groups are autonomous and the other is that people with internalized oppression who have experienced the alternative and explain their reasons for internalizing their oppression are autonomous. An example of the former is Rosa Parks, and of the latter is the Taliban woman (discussed in Oshana's earlier works) who can explain why she now repudiates the independence she enjoyed when she worked as a physician under a less restrictive Afghan regime. Oshana replies that these intuitions are

not really about autonomy. We should deny that these people are autonomous; indeed, in the case of Parks, remember that part of what she was protesting was her lack of autonomy. The contrast between Oshana's understanding of self-governance and the rest of the essays in the book suggests that feminists might do well to consider the boundaries between autonomy and values such as opportunity and negative freedom.

Oshana's is not the only essay that suggests that further feminist discussion about the relationship between autonomy and other values is important. Mackenzie argues that what have often been understood as behaviors necessary for human *flourishing* should be understood as prerequisites for *autonomy*. Natalie Stoljar argues that we should understand oppressed people's need to adapt their behavior to the expectations of people in dominant groups as a form of internalized oppression. However, it may be worth asking whether the problem with such expectations is really that they compromise *autonomy*, given that they help oppressed people achieve their goals in a nonideal world. Ann Cudd argues that, even if adaptive preferences are threats to autonomy, feminists should also understand them as problematic for other reasons. Specifically, Cudd argues that when we perpetuate our oppression, we often harm others. For example, a woman who complies with oppressive beauty norms perpetuates the expectation that women in general should do this--and this adversely affects other women. By focusing only on the autonomy harms of adaptive preferences, we miss other reasons that feminists should work against them. These contributions can be a useful starting point for further feminist discussion about the theoretical work we want a conception of autonomy to do.

Some essays in the collection advance feminist autonomy theory by building bridges between it and cutting-edge work in other feminist philosophical subfields. Beate Roessler's essay explains why epistemic injustice constitutes an autonomy harm. Her analysis contributes to both literatures, given that much epistemic injustice literature only gestures at why harms to oppressed people in their capacities as knowers should be classified as harms. For Roessler, testimonial injustice can impair autonomy, because autonomy requires being able to identify what one wants to do and what one cares about. Knowledge about things, in Roessler's view, requires knowledge about one's own mind; to know *p*, I must commit myself to affirming it. Testimonial injustice can cause an agent to question whether she is qualified to make up her own mind, and thus prevents her from acting in a genuinely self-determining way. Though similar points have been made in discussions of gaslighting and self-trust in the autonomy literature, Roessler's essay highlights the ways in which having one's knowledge about content seemingly unrelated to the self can nonetheless result in harm to the self.

Paul Benson's contribution connects autonomy theory to currently popular conversations about implicit bias and stereotype threat. Benson argues that empirical research about stereotype threat gives us reason to believe that there is a relational constituent of autonomy that has, up to this point, been overlooked. Stereotype threat compromises autonomy both by inducing anxiety and by inducing shame. According to Benson, stereotype threat exploits a broader human phenomenon called "belonging uncertainty." Even if there is a certain contingency to racial and gender stereotypes, in-group/out-group policing seems to be an ineluctable feature of human social life. A stable sense of social

belonging, then, is not just an important component of autonomy. It is a constitutively relational one--one whose presence requires certain forms of social relations, rather than certain subjective states in the agent. In addition to offering a very persuasive argument in favor of recognizing this dimension of autonomy, Benson's essay is a standout in terms of its engagement with empirical studies. Drawing on similar literature on in-group/out-group dynamics, Marilyn Friedman offers an insightful contribution about the autonomy dilemmas facing Jews who criticize oppressive policies implemented by the state of Israel. Friedman argues against the idea that criticizing the actions of one's historically oppressed group is a form of autonomy-diminishing self-hatred. Where a couple of the essays in the collection rely on heavily schematized discussions of the psychologies of oppressed people, Benson's and Friedman's empirically grounded points of departure make their analyses particularly useful for feminist politics and praxis.

Overall, *Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression* enriches the repertoire of philosophical approaches to autonomy. It shows that feminist philosophy of autonomy raises fruitful and distinctive questions and should be useful to feminist philosophers of autonomy, as well as to action theorists more broadly.