

Violence and the Boundaries of the Community: A Relational Approach to Autonomy

John Lawless

A concern for individual autonomy lies at the foundation of liberal political theory.¹ This concern emerges from our conceptions of ourselves as agents – as the authors of our own stories, and not simply members of the audience. Traditionally, moral and political philosophers have characterized agency as a power to choose the goals that one pursues. In this respect, agents differ from mere matter, which simply drifts along in the current of causes and effects; and from mere instruments, which may have purposes, but which receive these purposes from the agents that define and use them. However, moral and political philosophers have also recognized that human agency is fragile. People tend to share an intuitive sense that certain conditions – say, addiction or coercion – foist certain goals upon us, and so render us the unwilling playthings of alien forces. While these conditions may not deprive us of our agency entirely, they do compromise our abilities to make choices that are robustly, authentically our own. A concern for autonomy is a concern for *uncompromised* agency.

However, many feminist philosophers have argued that autonomy is a distinctively masculinist ideal. That is because autonomy has long been thought to require a kind of rugged individualism that stands at odds with women's lived experiences and concerns. On the most unabashedly individualist approaches, for instance, the fully autonomous agent could not make it one of her central projects to care for others, because in her devotion, the caregiver would become a mere prop supporting another person's agency. She could not make it a guiding principle that her projects fit harmoniously with others', because in doing so, she would allow other people's goals define her own. To be sure, she might sacrifice her own autonomy in order to fit herself within caring relations with others, but this would be a sacrifice. Autonomy, so

1 Perhaps we might say more precisely that a concern for *liberty* lies at liberalism's foundations. But liberals often cast liberty as an aspect of autonomy, one compromised by essentially interpersonal threats to autonomy: interference, coercion, or domination. A concern for liberty, on this approach, emerges from a more fundamental concern for autonomy. See John Lawless, "Agency in Social Context," *Res Philosophica* 94, no. 4 (2017): 3–7.

understood, might find a natural home in domains like business, law, politics, or war – domains governed by impersonal rules and defined by competition and conflict. But it stands at odds with the ideals that we associate with traditionally feminine pursuits: ideals of care, mutual dependence, and trust.

For some, the fruit of this critique is a deep skepticism of autonomy as a moral and political ideal, and the rejection of those liberal moralities built upon its foundation.² For others, though, the critique only reveals the weakness of overly individualist conceptions of agency and of autonomy. And feminist philosophers have been at the forefront of developing alternative, *relational* conceptions. These conceptions do not only emphasize the compatibility of autonomy with human relationships. More radically, relational approaches to autonomy aim to reveal the extent to which autonomy is possible *only* for those embedded in caring, respectful relationships with others. These approaches teach us that, if we aim to promote individual autonomy, we must not build walls between people, but must foster the conditions in which these relationships might flourish. The feminist critique of liberalism, then, transforms from a critique of autonomy (full stop) into a critique of the “atomist” conception of autonomy on which liberalism, at least in certain forms, seems to depend.³

Of course, there are a number of routes by which to unearth autonomy’s relational bases. As Natalie Stoljar and Catriona Mackenzie put the point, “relational autonomy” is an umbrella term that gathers together a wide variety of approaches.⁴ My goal in this chapter is not to catalogue them, but to focus on what I take to be a relatively unnoticed thread in this rich tapestry, and to identify the lessons that we can learn from this approach about the moral significance of violence. In particular, I argue that agency does not simply involve a capacity to decide the direction one’s life takes, but involves also practical authority in some domains. Certain choices *belong* to particular agents, and not to others. Our practical authority emerges from our relationships with others, relationships that the use of violence threatens to distort, or even to destroy.

The chapter has four parts. In Section 1, I sketch a traditional approach to agency, and identify some of the species of non-autonomous behavior that

2 See, for instance, Lorraine Code, “Second Persons,” in *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 71–109.

3 Jennifer Nedelsky first coined the term “relational autonomy,” and she has been among its most influential advocates. See, for instance, Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law’s Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

4 Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, “Introduction: Autonomy Refigured,” in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.

this approach makes comprehensible. In Section 2, I characterize the connections between agency, practical authority, and interpersonal relations, and I illustrate the ways in which attention to these connections adds nuance to our conceptions of non-autonomous behavior. In Section 3, I focus in particular on the ways in which violence threatens people's agency, arguing that it influences the structures of our relationships with one another, threatening at the limit to undermine our practical authority altogether.

1 **Autonomy as Mastery**

In this first section, I sketch a general approach to autonomy that I will call "the mastery approach." In later sections, this approach will provide a backdrop against which we will clarify the core insights that relational approaches advance. The mastery approach proceeds by distinguishing the person from the world around her. We lose agency to the extent that those things that are *not us* define our paths for us, pushing us in directions that we have not chosen for ourselves. Conversely, we enjoy autonomy when we enjoy mastery over the things that are not us. This has three dimensions: self-mastery (that is, mastery over potentially rebellious elements within one's own psychology), mastery in one's relations with other people, and mastery over the world at large.⁵

We enjoy self-mastery when we do not suffer psychological conditions that disrupt our perceptual, cognitive, or deliberative capacities – those capacities that jointly constitute the psychological capacity to choose from the options available to us. When we suffer conditions like phobia, addiction, mania, or compulsion, we are, in S.I. Benn's phrase, "inner-impelled," finding ourselves dragged along undesirable paths by forces rooted within our own minds. "Kleptomaniacs do not decide to steal," Benn writes. "[I]ndeed, they may decide not

5 It is not my intention in this section to pin the mastery approach on any particular thinkers. After all, those who develop relational approaches to autonomy invoke (something like) the mastery approach for two distinct purposes: first, to indict individualist biases in traditional moral and political thought; and second, to construct a foil against which to develop their own positive approaches. I take the second strategy in this chapter, because my primary goal is not to reveal the flaws in any particular thinker's conception of autonomy, but to reveal some overlooked dangers that attend the use of violence. Nonetheless, I do believe that the mastery approach is at the very least implicit in many contemporary approaches to autonomy (and especially in many contemporary approaches to liberty – see note 1). Proving the point, unfortunately, would require exegetical efforts that lie beyond the scope of the chapter. See, though, Lawless, "Agency in Social Context," in which I argue that prominent conceptions of freedom as non-interference (or non-vulnerability to interference) at least implicitly rely on something like the mastery approach.

to, but steal all the same. Reminding a compulsive handwasher that he washed his hands only moments ago will not stop him washing them again.”⁶ Conditions like addiction, mania, and compulsion disrupt the connections between the agent and her behavior, making her less responsible for her behavior than she would be in their absence. We appropriately attribute the kleptomaniac’s theft, not entirely to *her*, but at least in part to her kleptomania.

Why do these psychological conditions count as threats to our capacities for choice? On the mastery approach, an agent enjoys “self-mastery” only if her choices manifest her *true* or *authentic* desires or values. For instance, Harry Frankfurt has argued that there must be a kind of coherence between her “first-order” desires – that is, the desires that motivate her – and her “second-order” desires – that is, her desires about which desires *should* motivate her.⁷ A person’s second- (or higher-) order desires establish the boundaries between those desires that constitute her “self” from those that do not: When a person enjoys coherence between her first- and second-order desires – that is, when she is motivated by all and only those desires that she wants to motivate her – she “identifies” with the choices she makes. Self-mastery, then, requires that agents identify with their own actions, seeing themselves in their works. In contrast, the non-autonomous agent suffers motivations that she repudiates. While these motivations may be internal to her own psychology, they are at the same time alien to her. The kleptomaniac, for instance, may not identify with her yen to steal, and yet find herself unable to quell the motivation. Since she is unable to resist a motivation with which she does not identify, she does not fully direct her own life.

Interpersonal threats to agency include individual interactions, like coercion; or persistent relationships, like the relationship between the slaveholder and the slave. These interactions and relationships often involve limitations on people’s options. For instance, when the gunslinger offers you a choice between your money or your life, she narrows your range of options quite radically, taking away (for instance) the option of continuing on your way safely and in full possession of your valuables. However, something sets essentially interpersonal phenomena like coercion or subjugation apart from the mere limitation of one’s options. In particular, coercion and subjugation suffice to transform one person into an instrument of another person’s agency. Those who coerce or subjugate us act *through* us. Even though we might physically hand our valuables over to a gunslinger, it would be more accurate to say that

6 S.I. Benn, “Freedom, Autonomy, and the Concept of a Person,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 76 (1975): 116.

7 Harry G. Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 322–36.

the gunslinger takes the valuables from us. Her threats of violence make us passive in the interaction. Slavery (on this approach) aims to drive the phenomenon to its extreme, transforming the enslaved into the animate property of the slaveholder.

How does this transformation occur? On the mastery approach, we enjoy autonomy within those domains in which our choices are decisive. Through coercive interference in another person's choices, the coercing agent effectively brings her victim into a space within which *her* choices, and not her victim's, are decisive. In denying the pedestrian the option of continuing down the street in full possession of his valuables, the gunslinger brings the pedestrian's activities into her domain, and so gains a share of responsibility for his ensuing activities. The gunslinger's agency effectively cannibalizes her victim's.

Mastery in one's relations with others, then, requires that no one else interfere in one's activities,⁸ or (on more sophisticated views) that no one have a *capacity* to interfere in your activities without your (at least tacit) consent.⁹ And all else equal, the broader the domain within which one suffers no interference in one's activities, the more autonomous one is. At first glance, this might seem a strictly negative ideal: Our autonomy seems to require only that no one else enjoy mastery over us. However, if those who are able to withstand others' attempts to interfere in one's activities are (*ceteris paribus*) more autonomous than those who are not, then the pursuit of autonomy transforms into a pursuit of power. Mastery in one's relations with others seems to require mastery over others. As Berlin puts the point, "freedom for the pike is death for the minnows."¹⁰

Finally, in addition to intrapersonal and interpersonal threats to agency, some argue that generic constraints on our options might in themselves count as threats to our autonomy, whether they are the products of intentional interference in our activities or not. The idea here is that we often thwart others' attempts to hold us responsible for some state of affairs by pointing out to them that no alternative was available to us: We could not choose otherwise. This suggests that, for some possibility P, if we could not choose between P and not-P, then we cannot be held responsible either for P or for not-P. On this basis, we might find it tempting to represent limitations on our options as

8 Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 191–242; Benn, "Freedom, Autonomy, and the Concept of a Person."

9 Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 184–6.

10 Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 196. On versions of liberalism that adopt this kind of approach, equality appears as an exogenous concern, one requiring equal distributions of freedom.

threats to our autonomy: The fewer the options available to us, the less control we exert over our histories, and the more we become spectators to our own lives. Robust agency requires an expansive domain in which one is master of one's fate. We are fully autonomous, then, only when we enjoy mastery over the world at large – that is, only when we enjoy a wide range of options from which to choose.

These, then, are the main threats to agency on which the mastery approach focuses our attention. Intrapersonally, she must not suffer those psychological conditions that would prevent her from identifying with her own actions. Interpersonally, she must not be subject to coercion or to subjugation; no other person may choose the range of options from which she chooses. And non-personally, she must enjoy a relatively broad range of options. The picture that emerges is of an agent threatened by hostile forces on three fronts: by rebellious forces within her own psychology, by the wills of other agents, and by the diverse natural forces at play within the indifferent cosmos in which she finds herself. These forces do not dominate the fully autonomous agent. On the contrary, she dominates them: She enjoys mastery over her own psychology, mastery in her relations with others, and mastery over the natural world itself.

Taken to its limit, this approach forges a clear connection between agency and a propensity toward violence. When other people stand between the agent and her goals, the fully autonomous agent will be in a position to force them to acquiesce to her vision of the future. Simone de Beauvoir saw this clearly, writing that “Violence is the authentic proof of each one's loyalty to himself, to his passions, to his own will.”¹¹ It should be little wonder, then, that many feminists have long judged autonomy an unattractive ideal, and have drawn connections between the celebration of autonomy, so understood, and the valorization of war. The alternative is an ethic that celebrates our connections to nature and to one another, that recognizes the interdependence of all members of our vast natural and social ecology. And some have drawn on these insights to advance alternative conceptions of agency and of autonomy.

2 Agency, Responsibility, and Practical Authority

While the mastery approach to autonomy distinguishes the agent from the world around her, relational approaches proceed in part by blurring

11 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1974), 371; quoted in Iris Marion Young, “Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics,” *Women's Studies Int. Forum* 8, no. 3 (1985): 175.

these distinctions, emphasizing the connections between the agent and her environments – and especially between the agent and the people with whom she interacts. By blurring these boundaries, relational approaches reveal mastery to be a false idol, one that ultimately threatens the master's own agency.¹²

As I have mentioned, there is not one relational approach to autonomy. There are many. Some of the most influential relational approaches begin with an investigation into the nature of *self*-mastery, arguing that this apparently intrapersonal ideal in fact has significant interpersonal elements. For instance, some argue that self-mastery requires, not that we simply enjoy the kinds of psychological coherence we sketched above, but that we achieve and maintain this coherence *ourselves*, through what Gerald Dworkin calls “the practice of autonomy.”¹³ And those who take a relational approach to autonomy sometimes argue that these practices have significant interpersonal forms or elements,¹⁴ or that the quality of our interpersonal relations can affect our capacities to engage in these practices.¹⁵ Other relational approaches target agents' self-conceptions, arguing that the content of a person's self-conception can affect the quality of a person's autonomy, and that these self-conceptions are, in part, a matter of the agent's orientation toward others.¹⁶

In contrast with these approaches, I will focus on explicitly interpersonal phenomena. In particular, I will argue that an important aspect of agency – namely, practical authority – emerges from our interpersonal relationships. That is, the structures of our interpersonal relations affect the quality of our autonomy, not just indirectly – say, by affecting the quality of our pursuit of

12 Relational approaches largely aim to blur the boundaries between the agent and other people, but we might also (and many do) focus critical attention on the other boundaries central to the mastery approach: between the person and the diverse aspects of her own psychology, or between the person and her natural environment. See, for instance, Diana T. Meyers, “Decentralizing Autonomy: Five Faces of Selfhood,” in *Being Yourself: Essays on Identity, Action, and Social Life* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 49–76.

13 Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

14 Diana T. Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

15 Paul Benson, “Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization,” *Social Theory and Practice* 17, no. 3 (1991): 385–408.

16 Andrea C. Westlund, “Selflessness and Responsibility for Self: Is Deference Compatible with Autonomy?,” *The Philosophical Review* 112, no. 4 (2003): 483–523; Paul Benson, “Taking Ownership: Authority and Voice in Autonomous Agency,” in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, ed. John Christman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 101–26.

self-knowledge, or by affecting the content of our self-conceptions – but immediately. Our relations with others partially constitute us as agents.

(a) *Agency and responsibility.* In order to make this case, it will be useful to shift our attention slightly. In characterizing the mastery approach, we began with the claim that agents choose the directions that their lives take. However, it might be more appropriate to begin with a more fundamental claim, that agents are responsible for the lives they lead.

In refocusing on responsibility, I do not mean to focus on *causal* responsibility. Rather, following P.F. Strawson, I assume that our conceptions of ourselves as responsible beings relate to the sense that we are the apt targets of “reactive attitudes”: resentment, gratitude, contrition, forgiveness, admiration, and the like.¹⁷ When we are responsible for something – an event, an object, a state of affairs – people appropriately attribute that thing to us in a way that organizes the kinds of reactive attitudes they can appropriately bear toward us. The attitudes that we take toward an artist who has splattered some paint on a canvas – whether they be attitudes of admiration or contempt – are very different from the attitudes we take toward an earthquake that has the same effect, because the artist is responsible (in this distinctive mode) for the painting.¹⁸ To be sure, it could be that the painting is attributable to the artist in this distinctive mode *because* the painter (or perhaps more precisely, the painter’s free will) is causally responsible for it. But that is a substantive interpretation of the conditions in which something is attributable to us in this mode, and one that we need not adopt here.¹⁹

The conceptual distance between agency and responsibility (in this mode)²⁰ is negligible. As Westlund argues, those who do not exhibit any sense of their own responsibility for their own activities are liable to exhibit “a kind of confusion over [their] very status as a separately answerable agent.”²¹ This kind of

17 P.F. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” in *Studies in the Philosophy of Thought and Action: British Academic Lectures*, ed. P.F. Strawson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 72–96.

18 Susan Wolf, “Responsibility, Moral and Otherwise,” *Inquiry* 58, no. 2 (2015): 130.

19 I should emphasize that I do not mean to focus strictly on moral responsibility any more than I mean to focus strictly on causal responsibility. Moral responsibility is related to responsibility in the sense that interests me, since the morally responsible agent is the apt target of distinctively moral reactive attitudes, including moral praise and moral blame. However, as the example of the artist should show, certain activities, works, or states of affairs can be attributable to us in ways that make us the apt targets of reactive attitudes other than moral praise or moral blame.

20 I drop the qualification from this point forward.

21 Westlund, “Selflessness and Responsibility for Self: Is Deference Compatible with Autonomy?,” 487.

confusion might take several forms. In some cases, the confused party might see herself as akin to inanimate matter, whose activities are mere entries in a causal chain. (Imagine a brief exchange envisioned by Richard Moran: “Do you intend to pay the money back?” “As far as I can tell, yes.”²²) In other, perhaps more familiar cases, the confused party might see herself as an instrument apt for others’ use. Westlund, for instance, invites us to consider a deferential wife. Of course, there are many forms that deference might take. In particular, we might distinguish *principled* deference from *thoroughgoing* deference. In a case of principled deference, we defer to another’s judgments or choices, but are prepared to explain or justify our deference when others press us.²³ In a case of thoroughgoing deference, when others attempt to discuss our values, desires, and motivations, we simply appeal to the judgments and choices of the person to whom we defer, caught in a groundless justificatory loop. This is the kind of deference on which Westlund focuses, and the deferential wife she envisions consistently adverts to her husband’s choices and judgments when others attempt to discuss her values, desires, and motivations:

When pressed to say *why* she should always come second, she ends up re-articulating what her husband wants and re-asserting her already manifest commitment to putting what he wants first. Each of her answers simply re-expresses her deference – it is as though she simply cannot *hear* questions meant to challenge that deference.²⁴

The deferential wife, Westlund argues, “seems to experience others’ questioning as aimed *through* her at her husband.”²⁵ She does not see herself as an agent at all. Rather, she sees herself as an instrument for the pursuit of her husband’s projects and for the promotion of his values.

This case is extremely rich. For our purposes, though, the most important feature of the case is that it illuminates the significance of a shift in attention from the connections between agency and choice, toward the connections between agency and responsibility. Presumably, Westlund’s deferential wife

22 Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 26.

23 In this vein, Westlund characterizes “an extreme Anti-Feminist... who believes that women ought to put their own interests last and defer to their husbands in all matters relevant to their joint lives.” Westlund contends that this kind of deference need not in itself compromise a person’s autonomy. Westlund, “Selflessness and Responsibility for Self: Is Deference Compatible with Autonomy?,” 512.

24 *Ibid.*, 487–8.

25 *Ibid.*, 510.

in question understands that she has a *capacity* for choice, and that through these choices she can affect the world around her. She must experience the psychological process of confronting a range of options, selecting one, and enacting that selection. Her agency suffers, however, because she does not take herself to have responsibility in any matters. Her own activities are not properly attributable to her, but to her husband. As a result, she takes herself to have no reason to probe her own values, desires, and motivations, because she does not see these as having any significant bearing on her activities. To her mind, it is her *husband's* values that matter, and these manifest in his judgments and choices – the very judgments and choices to which she consistently adverts when others attempt to challenge her sense of herself. She does not see herself as an agent, not because she is ignorant of her own psychological capacities for choice, but because she is ignorant of her own responsibility.

(b) *Responsibility and practical authority.* Once we take as our starting point the connections between agency and responsibility, we can demonstrate the significance of our interpersonal relationships to our agency. Put simply, we are the apt objects of others' reactive attitudes, not (only) because we enjoy capacities for choice, but because we are bearers of practical authority. And our practical authority emerges from our relationships with one another.

To have practical authority in some domain is to “own” choices within that domain.²⁶ It is for choices within that domain to belong to you. This is an essentially normative and relational matter. We can illustrate the point by appeal to the distinction between ownership and possession. To own a material good is not simply to possess or control it, but to have some complex and variable bundle of prerogatives to use the good in question, claims against others' use of the good, powers to waive those claims, powers to transfer ownership to others, and so on. Whether one enjoys these properties depends on one's relationship with others, because the properties are themselves relational. One cannot have a claim against others' use of a material good unless others have a correlated obligation, nor can one have a prerogative to use some good if others have a claim against that use. Practical authority in some range of choices emerges from the same kind of relational properties. In broad strokes, it involves prerogatives to make those choices, and claims against various kinds of interference or oversight in one's decisions. Crucially, the scope of a person's

26 Paul Benson emphasizes this theme in Paul Benson, “Feeling Crazy: Self-Worth and the Social Character of Responsibility,” in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 72–93. There, however, Benson – like Westlund – focuses more immediately on the ways in which agents conceive of themselves, rather than on the social relations constitutive of ownership on which I focus here.

practical authority – that is, of the domains in which she enjoys the relevant prerogatives and claims – is not necessarily coextensive with the scope of the domains in which she enjoys mastery as we characterized it above. The mere capacity to choose from among a range of options without interference is not identical to the practical authority to do so. A thief may enjoy the capacity to decide to whether to sell my car to a fence, or to keep it for himself, but the (legal) authority to decide what to do with my stolen car remains with me.

We can show that the distribution of practical authority affects the distribution of responsibility by showing that *misjudgments* about the scope of a person's authority yield misjudgments about the scope of her responsibility – that is, about the kinds of things that are attributable to her in ways that make her the apt target of various reactive attitudes. In the following two cases, one person is *not* responsible for some state of affairs, even though (by assumption) he or she enjoys the capacity to decide whether that possible state of affairs should become actual. But another person incorrectly judges that she *is* responsible for the state of affairs, because he misjudges the scope of her practical authority.

Chivalrous Misogynist: After a night out, Joe and Daria share a taxi back to their neighboring apartments. Daria has had a lot to drink, but Joe opts not to make a pass at his drunk friend. The next day, he is surprised – and a little disappointed – that she is not more grateful for his gentlemanly restraint. As time goes on, he frequently recounts this anecdote to illustrate his deep concern for women.

Pragmatic Boyfriend: While Laura walks down the street, a man she does not know suddenly jumps in front of her and shouts: “Smile!” She continues walking without a response, and the stranger unleashes a slew of familiar misogynist slurs. Laura recounts the experience later to her boyfriend Tom, who shrugs and asks: “Why didn’t you just smile? It wouldn’t have cost you anything, and you would have avoided an unpleasant situation.”

In Chivalrous Misogynist, Joe may enjoy a capacity to choose between sleeping with Daria, or not. In Pragmatic Boyfriend, Laura may enjoy a capacity to choose between avoiding the stranger's abuse by complying with his demand for a smile, or not. But to bear a capacity to make these choices does not suffice for responsibility.

In Chivalrous Misogynist, Joe has internalized misogynist assumptions in which women's bodies belong to men. On these assumptions, sexual assault is a matter of men's virtues and vices rather than of women's rights: Men have the practical authority to enjoy women's bodies, but ought to do so chivalrously, with a concern for women's well-being. Of course, Joe's assumptions are incorrect. Daria – and not Joe – has the authority to decide who will touch her, and

how. Far from revealing his own virtues, Joe's misrepresentation of his inaction as lordly beneficence reveals the depth of his disrespect for his (putative) friend. More relevantly to our purposes, though, Joe's assumptions bear on his judgments about the distribution of responsibility: He expects gratitude and praise for a choice that was not his to make, because he believes that it *was* his to make. He (incorrectly) believes that he is responsible for the fact that they did not sleep together, because he (incorrectly) believes that the choice to do so or not belonged to him. If Daria were to overhear him recounting tales of his own gracious restraint, she would be well within her rights to correct him: "We didn't sleep together because *I* didn't consent."²⁷

In Pragmatic Boyfriend, Tom holds Laura responsible for the abuse she suffered, because it was within her power to avoid it. She had the capacity to choose not to risk the passerby's anger, and she did not exercise it. Tom's response to the situation reveals his own misogynist assumptions, on which men enjoy the prerogative to police women's facial expressions, and women lack the prerogative to relax their faces while in public without men's permission. Of course, Tom's assumptions are as inaccurate as were Joe's. It was not Laura's responsibility to protect herself from the abuse she suffered. The responsibility for that abuse lies squarely with the man who issued it. (In general, the familiar activity of "blaming the victim" relies on incorrect assumptions about the distribution of practical authority: We hold victims responsible for wrongs perpetrated against them when we assume that they do not have claims against the treatment in question, and have a responsibility to protect themselves from it, if they wish to avoid it.)

These two cases show that the distribution of responsibility depends on the distribution of practical authority.

(c) *Practical authority and representation.* Here we reach the crucial thesis: that the systematic misrepresentation of a person's responsibility in itself can effect the cannibalization of her agency by another's.

When we represent one another as agents, we rely on what I will call the "public concepts" effective in our communities – concepts that define various roles, and afford the occupants of those roles practical authority in specific domains. Some of these roles are defined in law. Many others are implicit in our social practices; we learn them, not by reading the legal code, but in large part by exposure to the narratives that pervade our discourses.²⁸ These extra-legal

²⁷ Of course, he *would* be responsible for the *violation* of her rights against assault.

²⁸ Hilde Lindemann explores the roles that "master narratives" play in the ongoing construction of our relationships, and the effects that these constructions have on our agency. However, she focuses in particular on the ways in which these narratives can affect our

public concepts include concepts of gender, sexuality, race, nationality, ability and disability, and the like. I do not mean to imply that these concepts are simple, static, or easily defined. In particular, theorists of intersectionality have demonstrated that these concepts do not apply independently of one another, but inflect one another in countless ways. As a result, we cannot investigate (for instance) the content of our racial concepts independently of any investigation into the content of our gender or class concepts. My only point is that we rely on concepts from our discourses – malleable concepts, imprecisely articulable at best, but generally accessible – in order to judge the scope of any person's practical authority. This suggests a further sense in which our agency emerges from our relationships with other people. The concepts on which people rely as they judge the scope of our practical authority depend, not on choices that we make, but on the stories that people tell – both literally, and in their interactions – and on the stories to which people listen.

Moreover, when these concepts are badly formed – in particular, when they serve as part of an oppressive ideology – they can yield systematic misjudgments about the scope of a person's practical authority. For instance, the misogynist society educates its members into a set of gendered concepts with which they misrepresent the scope and structure of women's practical authorities. These sexist concepts generate the systematic misrepresentation of women's practical authority by their peers, yielding systematic misjudgments about women's responsibilities. Moreover, this leads to systematic distortions in the reactive attitudes that people direct toward women. When we internalize these concepts, we (like Joe) praise men for choices that were not theirs to make – putatively chivalrous choices not to abuse or assault women. And (like Tom) we implicitly assume that men have the practical authority to oversee women's activities, right down to the facial expressions women wear. In these kinds of cases, men cannibalize women's agency, not only by interfering in women's activities, but simply by claiming and affirming one another's practical authority over women's lives, and so claiming and affirming one another's responsibility for women's activities. (In fact, in Chivalrous Misogynist, Joe effectively claims responsibility for what happens to Daria's body without actually interfering in Daria's activities at all.)

senses of people's characters and talents, causing us to represent some people as overly excitable or morally immature. I suggest that we can extend Lindemann's general idea once we notice that narratives play further (though related) roles in our social lives. Not only do they affect our senses of one another's characters, they also affect our judgments about the kinds of choices that belong to people in different social locations. See Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

Let's summarize the argument so far. First, an interest in agency involves an interest in responsibility for the course that one's life takes. Second, one's responsibility for the course that one's life takes depends, in part, on the structures of one's relations with others, and on the distribution of practical authority that emerges from these structures. Systematic misrepresentations of one's practical authority yield systematic distortions in others' judgments about one's responsibility, and so distort the reactive attitudes that others adopt toward you. These distortions generate important maldistributions of agency, akin to the kinds of cannibalization on which the mastery approach focused our attention. However, the mastery approach's focus on interference (or on vulnerability to interference) misses all of this. It overemphasizes the significance of one's capacity to choose from among a range of available options, in a way that obscures the significance of our representations of one another.

3 Anger, Violence, and Public Concepts

So far, I have argued that to be an agent is, in part, to enjoy practical authority within some domains, and that our practical authority emerges from our relationships with others – relationships constituted (at least in part) by distributions of prerogatives, claims, and obligations. Here, I argue that by representing agency simply as a capacity to choose without interference from among the available options, the mastery approach obscures morally significant differences between two distinct modes of influencing the flow of events: those that count as exercises of practical authority, and those that simply rely on brute force. First, it causes us to misunderstand those forms of anger with which we exercise practical authority in our interactions with others, misconstruing them as interpersonal threats to agency akin to violent subjugation. And second, it causes us to miss the multiple ways in which violence threatens people's agency: not only does violence involve the forceful direction of another's life, it also affects the kinds of public concepts effective in our communities, often for the worse.

(a) *Misunderstanding anger.* First, the mastery approach yields impoverished conceptions of anger. Here, our argument dovetails with another important theme in feminist philosophy: the mischaracterization of women's anger as hysterical and unreasonable.²⁹ The expression of certain forms of anger, particularly resentment, is an appropriate response to someone's encroachment

29 Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1983), 84–94; see also Rebecca Kukla, "Discursive Injustice," *Hypatia* 29, no. 2 (2014): 440–57.

into the domains in which one enjoys practical authority. But the mastery approach risks construing anger in general as a weapon with which others might encroach on our activities, cannibalizing our own agency. By way of illustration, consider a new case:

Compliant Husband: Georgia calls her husband, Calvin, to tell him that she will be working late, and that he will have to pick the kids up from their after-school activities. Calvin accepts the burden without complaint. But when he tells his coworkers that he can't join them for a drink after work, they ask why he didn't just tell her he had plans. "I just don't want to set her off," he answers with a shrug.

I assume that Georgia has a claim on the equitable distribution of the burdens of parenting. And we might well expect that, were Calvin to ignore these claims, she might reasonably become angry with him. In dismissing his wife's hypothetical anger as a bomb that might be set off, though, Calvin reveals that he would not properly understand that anger as resentment at his violation of her claim. Presumably, he has internalized misogynist assumptions on which mothers have distinctive obligations to attend to the needs of their children, and to take on a greater share of the burdens of parenting than do fathers. As a result, he does not take Georgia to have the authority to decide that he will pick their children up from school. ("That's really her job," he might think to himself.) As a result, he would not understand Georgia's anger as expressive of a legitimate demand, but would only see how unpleasant for him it would be to endure her irritation. And he would conceive of himself as the victim of the same kind of cannibalization that we first saw in the gunslinger's case: By (metaphorically) holding her finger poised over a detonator, Georgia reduces Calvin to an instrument in the pursuit of her own goals. We should reject Calvin's self-representation, because we know that the choices that his wife denies to him fall within the scope of their shared authority as co-parents to their children. She does not cannibalize his agency, and so does not threaten his autonomy, because the choices in which she involves herself were not fully his choices to make in the first place. Through her anger, Georgia simply expresses a demand that Calvin recognize and respect her practical authority.

Crucially, moreover, Georgia's practical authority emerges from the very same relations that generate Calvin's practical authority. Calvin is subject to the reactive attitude of resentment because of the ways in which his relationships construct his agency. He is the apt target of reactive attitudes in part because certain choices belong to him, and these choices belong to him in virtue of his normative relationships with others – including his relationship with Georgia. Outside of those relationships, Calvin might yet enjoy *causal* responsibility for changes in the world around him, but we could not attribute those

choices to him in the way that we attribute choices to people. Eliminate those normative relationships, and you do not simply liberate Calvin from Georgia's authority; you liberate Calvin from responsibility, and so from agency itself.

By emphasizing the significance of practical authority to agency, then, the relational approach to autonomy reveals that anger is not contiguous with the violent subjugation of those who would stand between us and our goals. When deployed properly, expressions of anger are important tokens with which agents exercise their practical authority in their interactions with one another, and not simply weapons with which others threaten us in order to force us to do as they want.

(b) *Misunderstanding violence.* At the same time, reliance on the mastery approach yields impoverished resources with which to understand the ways in which violence threatens individual agency. We saw above that the mastery approach characterizes essentially interpersonal threats to agency like domination, subjugation, or oppression in terms of one person's interference in another's activities. However, we saw in Section 2 that the maldistribution of practical authority can in itself lead to the cannibalization of one person's agency by another's. And violence is liable to generate precisely these maldistributions of practical authority. Violent subjugation threatens people's agency, not only by affecting the range of available options, but by affecting the kinds of concepts on which we rely in the course of our interactions with one another.

Consider, for instance, a confrontation between protesters and the police. And assume, in particular, that the protesters are peaceful, but the police arrive on the scene decked out in riot gear, wielding mace and nightsticks. In presenting themselves in this fashion, the police express a view of their relationship with the protesters: The use of riot gear serves less to contain possible violence from the protestors than to communicate to onlookers that the protesters are violent. The way in which the police meet the protesters serves to deliver the message that those toward whom their violence is directed are not members of the normative community. It expresses a judgment that the protesters in question stand in no normative relations with others – or at least, that the protesters cannot be trusted to regulate their own activities as these normative relations require. This message, of course, affects the ways in which other people represent their relations with the protesters. Onlookers who respect the police, who take the police to be admirable and reasonable, will allow these expressions to inform the concepts on which they rely in their representations of the protesters. They will come to read violence into the protesters' actions, even when those actions are entirely benign. At the limit, they will cease to understand the protesters as beings with whom they stand in normative relations

at all, and so will cease to see the protesters as bearers of practical authority.³⁰ The concepts that arise from these understandings, and on which people rely as they represent their neighbors' practical authority in the course of their interactions, will be concepts on which the protesters, and others like them, do not count as agents. In general, violence threatens agency, not only by limiting people's options, but by generating systematic distortions in the ways in which we attribute practical authority and responsibility within our communities.

Of course, violence does not simply threaten the practical authority of those against whom it is enacted. To some extent, the violent subjugation of others may even be destructive of the perpetrator's agency. If my general mode of carrying myself through the world expresses my commitment to mastery, then there might come a point at which I communicate to others that I have no obligations to any of them, and so cannot be trusted to regulate my own actions as any obligations might require. I understand myself as an unconstrained will, bound by no normative relations with the other members of my community. If, through the enactment of my commitment to mastery, I affect the concepts that others invoke as they represent my actions, then I will teach others to see me as someone who bears no obligations to anyone. And once others cease to see me as possessed of obligations, they also cease to see me as possessed of prerogatives or claims; they cease to see me as a bearer of practical authority at all. By my reliance on violence, I cease to present myself as the apt target of any reactive attitudes, and I assimilate myself to the natural forces of the world – to the earthquake or the hurricane. However significantly I might broaden the range of options available to me, however effectively I might discourage others from interfering in my activities, I do not secure my own agency. I destroy it.

This phenomenon likely manifests in the kinds of confrontations between police and protesters that we characterized above. To be sure, the police may maintain their practical authority in their interactions with *some* members of the community, namely, those who fall within the boundaries that the police draw with their violence, between the members of the community and those outside of it. However, if their violence generates a set of public concepts according to which *no* normative relations govern their interactions with the people against whom they exercise that violence, that will undermine police

30 We might expect police to behave in this way if many of the protestors are people of color. The message that police would communicate by this behavior would then would fit into (and reproduce) narratives already pervasive within our public discourses, organized around the racist construction of "the state of nature" – a condition essentially outside of civil society and beyond human law – as a state to be found in those spaces occupied by people of color. See Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

officers' own authority in their engagement with the communities they police – and not only the authority of the specific officers who engage in violence, but of police as a social class. The message that the police officers send with their mace and nightsticks will generate a set of public concepts in which there are no normative relations between civilians and *any* police officers – whatever their individual virtues and vices. In the analysis of relations between the police and the people, the individualist model of “a few bad apples” fails to capture this systematic phenomenon, that *all* police officers' normative relations with the people with whom they interact are defined by the ways in which police officers in general comport themselves.³¹

4 Toward a Case for Nonviolence

In the preceding section, I identified some of the dangers inherent in the use of violence. By attending to these dangers, we can of course begin to build a case for nonviolence. However, we should expect this argument to yield an ambivalent conclusion, at best. Two caveats are in order.

First, not all violence expresses the message that the victims of violence are beyond the boundaries of the community. If the parties to an interaction locate that violence within clearly marked boundaries, they may be able to maintain their broader normative relations with one another outside of those boundaries. The ropes around a boxing ring and the lines painted along the edges of a football field can serve to establish these boundaries. There may be much that is objectionable about violent sports like boxing or football, but the fact that these sports involve violent clashes does not suffice to show that they tend to undermine those normative relations out of which our practical authorities emerge.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, not everyone bears an equal burden of securing concepts by which we will be able to judge the scope of people's practical authority correctly – certainly not in non-ideal circumstances like ours. In particular, those who live and labor under oppression do not always bear the burden of revising the public concepts that generate our distorted judgments about the scope of their practical authority. All too often, they may have little choice but to resort to violence in order to defend themselves

³¹ For an interesting sociological study of the kind of phenomenon I aim to characterize here, see Charles R. Epp, Steven Maynard-Moody, and Donald Haider-Markel, *Pulled Over: How Police Stops Define Race and Citizenship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014). For further discussion, see the essays in Angela J. Davis, ed., *Policing the Black Man* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2017).

against those who oppress them. Their violence may well have the potential to affect the public concepts effective in our communities adversely. However, it remains an open moral question how we ought to distribute the burden of containing that potential. And there is good reason to suspect that it should fall far more heavily, not on the shoulders of those who suffer oppression, but on the shoulders of those who benefit from it.

In light of these qualifications, the case for nonviolence that I envision here would seem to fit within the tradition that Carol Cohn and Sara Ruddick name “antiwar feminism.” This tradition, Cohn and Ruddick write, involves “an abiding suspicion of the use of violence, even in the best of causes,” partly on the grounds that “[t]he ability of violence to achieve its stated aims is routinely overestimated, while the complexity of its costs is overlooked.” Nonetheless (Cohn and Ruddick continue), antiwar feminism “neither rejects all wars as wrong in principle nor condemns people just because they resort to violence.”³² In this chapter, we have attempted to illuminate some of the hidden costs of violence, but we should not think on this basis that we have a principled case for pacifism. We have identified one kind of concern to which we ought to attend as we plan our political strategies, but we cannot yet insist that that concern should override all others.

5 Conclusion

Relational approaches to autonomy are no less diverse than are the forms of human sociality themselves. And we easily could develop a critique of violence by focusing on any one of the diverse ways in which we depend on caring, respectful relationships with others for the cultivation and maintenance of individual agency. In this chapter, I have focused on only one aspect of human agency that emerges from (and so depends on) our interpersonal relations. I have focused, not on our capacities to bend the world to our wills, but on our practical authority in some choices; and I have argued that whether we enjoy this authority depends on the concepts that other people rely on in their representations of us. Attending to this aspect of agency affords us resources with which to draw a morally significant distinction between, on the one hand, the exercise of practical authority (even in the expression of negatively tinged attitudes like anger); and on the other hand, the violent subjugation of those who stand between us and our goals. Any practical philosophy that truly derives

32 Carol Cohn and Sara Ruddick, “A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Weapons of Mass Destruction,” in *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, ed. Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 405–7.

from a concern for individual autonomy must take this distinction to heart. In particular, first, we must be suspicious (though not outright dismissive) of any attempt to label particular actions “violent,” because such labels might obscure the allegedly violent actor’s practical authority. At the same time, when we *do* encounter violence, we must be alert to its many hidden costs. By attending in these ways to the distinction between violence and authority, we shed light on some common modes of discourse concerning political protest. Pejorative descriptions of peaceful protesters as members of a violent mob, and calls to arm the police against such protesters, might reflect an inchoate concern to protect people’s agency from the threats that an anarchic mob might represent. But this representation of the protesters confuses outrage with unbridled force, and so sees violence where there is none; and the call to arm the police against them ignores the ways in which this will affect the content of our public concepts, distorting the relationships among the members of our communities. This mode of discourse, then, fundamentally betrays the concern for individual autonomy from which it arises.

Bibliography

- Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1974.
- Benn, S.I. “Freedom, Autonomy, and the Concept of a Person.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 76 (1975): 109–30.
- Benson, Paul. “Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization.” *Social Theory and Practice* 17, no. 3 (1991): 385–408.
- Benson, Paul. “Feeling Crazy: Self-Worth and the Social Character of Responsibility.” In *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, edited by Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, 72–93. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Benson, Paul. “Taking Ownership: Authority and Voice in Autonomous Agency.” In *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, edited by John Christman, 101–26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Berlin, Isaiah. “Two Concepts of Liberty.” In *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, edited by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, 191–242. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- Code, Lorraine. “Second Persons.” In *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*, 71–109. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Cohn, Carol, and Sara Ruddick. “A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Weapons of Mass Destruction.” In *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, edited by Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee, 405–35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Davis, Angela J., ed. *Policing the Black Man*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2017.

- Dworkin, Gerald. *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Epp, Charles R., Steven Maynard-Moody, and Donald Haider-Markel. *Pulled Over: How Police Stops Define Race and Citizenship*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Frankfurt, Harry G. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." In *Free Will*, edited by Gary Watson, Second Edition, 322–36. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1983.
- Henning, Kristin. "Boys to Men: The Role of Policing in the Socialization of Black Boys." In *Policing the Black Man*, edited by Angela J. Davis, 57–94. New York: Pantheon Books, 2017.
- Kukla, Rebecca. "Discursive Injustice." *Hypatia* 29, no. 2 (2014): 440–57.
- Lawless, John. "Agency in Social Context." *Res Philosophica* 94, no. 4 (2017): 471–98.
- Lindemann Nelson, Hilde. *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Mackenzie, Catriona, and Natalie Stoljar. "Introduction: Autonomy Refigured." In *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, edited by Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, 3–31. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Meyers, Diana T. "Decentralizing Autonomy: Five Faces of Selfhood." In *Being Yourself: Essays on Identity, Action, and Social Life*, 49–76. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004.
- Meyers, Diana T. *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.
- Mills, Charles. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Moran, Richard. *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Nedelsky, Jennifer. *Law's Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Pettit, Philip. *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Strawson, P.F. "Freedom and Resentment." In *Studies in the Philosophy of Thought and Action: British Academic Lectures*, edited by P.F. Strawson, 72–96. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Westlund, Andrea C. "Selflessness and Responsibility for Self: Is Deference Compatible with Autonomy?" *The Philosophical Review* 112, no. 4 (2003): 483–523.
- Wolf, Susan. "Responsibility, Moral and Otherwise." *Inquiry* 58, no. 2 (2015): 127–142.
- Young, Iris Marion. "Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics." *Women's Studies Int. Forum* 8, no. 3 (1985): 173–83.