**Substantive or Procedural Autonomy: Willing Slaves and Deferential Housewives**

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Autonomy remains a central yet troubling issue for contemporary feminism. At least partly, this results from a paradox at the heart of both liberal and feminist theory: the paradox of the willing slave or, in the feminist formulation, the paradox of the deferential housewife. Simply put, how can a concept of autonomy, of choice, explain the choice not to choose? On one hand, autonomy can be understood in terms of the procedures founding choice (procedural autonomy). On the other, autonomy can be understood in terms of the nature of the choice itself (substantive autonomy). Substantive accounts of autonomy reject as inadequate content-neutral, procedural accounts of autonomy for understanding the lack of autonomy inherent in the deferential housewife. In this paper, I will argue that a procedural notion of autonomy can address concerns about oppressive socialization by examining not only the procedural conditions of autonomy, but by also juxtaposing each of those conditions with an examination of the choice over time. A consideration of the procedural conditions at work in the past, present and future of the agent allows insight into oppressive socialization without imposing substantive limits on autonomy.

**Personal Autonomy**

Autonomy refers to the human capacity for choice. Common classifications of autonomy include political autonomy, moral autonomy and personal autonomy. Political autonomy refers to the authority of a person or a collection of persons to choose their rulers. Political autonomy specifies the legitimating authority of the ruled over the rulers.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Moral autonomy is tied to the ability of persons to impose rules of conduct or choice upon themselves. Persons exercise moral autonomy when they discern rules of right or wrong conduct and use these rules to guide and judge their choices. Moral autonomy is best exemplified by Kant’s categorical imperative. This Imperative establishes a generalizable rule of conduct which persons should impose on themselves and their actions. In this way, moral autonomy connotes reason as an abstract contemplation of options and an impersonal application of universal laws of conduct.[[2]](#footnote-2) Moral autonomy, whether in its simplest form as a person imposing rules of right or wrong upon themselves or in its Kantian form as persons discerning and following universal rules of conduct, is a particular kind of personal autonomy.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Personal autonomy denotes self-management,[[4]](#footnote-4) but does not demand a rational imposition of rules regarding right and wrong conduct on oneself. For personal autonomy, choices must genuinely flow from the self to be considered autonomous. But, they may be derived from an assortment of different considerations, including emotional, relational, or intuitive considerations.[[5]](#footnote-5) Personal autonomy refers to the ability to choose among limited options, not necessarily to the ability to rationally and abstractly measure alternative options and choose accordingly. It is this concept of personal autonomy which this paper engages.

**Feminism, liberalism and Autonomy**

The concept of autonomy is fundamental to liberalism, although the early liberals never used the exact term. John Locke, for example, observed that “Men's happiness or misery is most part of their own making"[[6]](#footnote-6) and articulated a political philosophy which both recognized and celebrated personal autonomy. Locke’s political philosophy aims to maximize both political autonomy, by establishing government based in consent, and personal autonomy, by separating public and private spheres of activities. John Stuart Mill continued this tradition, praising individuality which, he argued, spurs human progress. Mill declares “He who chooses his own plan for himself, employs all his faculties.”[[7]](#footnote-7) For both Locke and Mill, indeed for all liberals, persons need protection from oppression in order to flourish. The evolution of liberalism can be tied to a continuing exploration of the multiple sources of oppression which hinder autonomy.

Feminism began in an alliance with these liberal sentiments, reaching to secure for women the protections and possibilities promised by those early liberal voices. The second wave of feminism perceived the limits of these liberal promises and of the liberal conception of autonomy. Many of these second wave feminists found the liberal distinction between private and public to be enslaving rather than liberating and branded the liberal concept of autonomy as a masculine construct which erases women’s experiences and misrepresents human nature.[[8]](#footnote-8) Any notion which depicts persons as “of their own making” or which describes the individual as choosing “his own plan,” forgets the social, relational dynamic of the lived human experience. Choices are not made from a distance, in the abstract. Choices are bound by the lived experience of relationships which both determine our choices and the persons that we are. Mothers do not simply choose to love a child - that love frames both their choices and the persons that they are.

This feminist interrogation of the notion of autonomy, along with communitarian voices pointing to the “limits” of liberal individualism,[[9]](#footnote-9) prompted a reevaluation of the meaning and nature of autonomy. In particular, some feminist thinkers, rejecting the abstract individualism of traditional notions of autonomy, but reluctant to shed the protection of personal choice which that concept offers, called for a reformulation of autonomy as social and relational.[[10]](#footnote-10) Jennifer Nedelsky, one of the earliest feminists to call for a reframing of autonomy, declared “Feminism requires a new conception of autonomy” which “combine(s) the claim of the constitutiveness of social relations with the value of self-determination.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Mackenzie’s and Stoljar’s leading-edge volume, *Relational Autonomy*, collected a variety of feminist voices intent on recovering and reformulating the concept of autonomy so that it retains the protections for personal choice but also explicitly integrates an understanding of agents as bound by their bodies, society and history. These proponents of “relational autonomy” share a rejection of abstract, ahistorical, instrumentally rational notions of autonomy. Abstract, ahistorical notions of autonomy can never recognize the defining impact of oppressive socialization on oppressed persons, an impact which women’s lived experiences reveals. Traditional notions of autonomy can never capture the reality of human life as lived through an intricate web of relationships - relationships through which the agent is molded and bound. It is through and within this intricate web of relationships that the agent expresses her agency. Thus, relational autonomy draws “attention to the connections among an agents’ self-conception, her social context, and her capacities for autonomy.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

So, proponents of autonomy today share a theoretical challenge. This challenge revolves around the reconceiving of autonomy so that it accounts for both agency and socialization. Disagreement exists, however, in regard to the conditions necessary to a model of autonomy which both recognizes the social, relational person and also provides enough room for genuine choice. As a result of disagreements about how prescriptive a model of autonomy needs to be to account for oppressive socialization, two broad types of approaches emerged: procedural and substantive.

**Procedural Autonomy**

Procedural accounts of autonomy build on the earlier work of Gerald Dworkin and Harry Frankfurt[[13]](#footnote-13) to frame a notion of autonomy which relies on content neutral criteria related to the process of choice-making. The remainder of this section explores two current, prominent procedural expressions of autonomy. In the next section I survey the challenges to these procedural conceptions of autonomy posed by proponents of substantive conceptions of autonomy. I conclude with a demonstration of the efficacy of procedural conditions of autonomy once they are combined with an insight into the temporal conditions in which choice emerges. I identify two procedural conditions of autonomy which once juxtaposed with a consideration of the temporal context of the choice, best express the relation-bound, autonomous person.

Procedural notions of autonomy rely on value neutral conditions which, they conclude, best respect the agent’s autonomy by rejecting substantive limits on choice, thereby, allowing the widest possible array of options. In order to evaluate the autonomy of a choice, procedural approaches to autonomy put aside considerations of the content of a good choice or the character of a good agent in order to focus on the process of choice-making. Procedural approaches refuse to eliminate options available to the agent prior to the agents own interaction with, consideration of or action on those options. The sorting among options must occur within the process of the agent confronting or deliberating in terms of a particular choice. Choices should not be sorted and categorized as autonomous or non-autonomous prior to the agent’s own (hypothetical or actual) deliberation by labeling some conclusions, choices and/or lives as non-autonomous. This is what happens when a substantive approach to autonomy labels some perspectives, some decisions or some choices as inherently non-autonomous.

Procedural notions of autonomy share a fear of the restrictions substantive conditions would place on autonomy. Specifically, proponents of procedural notions of autonomy share a rejection of prescriptive conditions of autonomy regarding either the character of the agent and/or the outcome of the decision-making process in which the agent engages. For example, proponents of procedural notions of autonomy refuse to designate as a requirement of autonomy that the agent be self-regarding. As long as the agent’s deliberation demonstrates the appropriate procedural conditions for autonomous choice, engages in the appropriate process, the character of the agent is not at issue. Proponents of procedural autonomy also refuse to designate any particular outcome of the choice as necessarily autonomous or non-autonomous. For example, if an agent engages in the appropriate process and subsequently chooses submission, that choice to submit would be considered autonomous. Thus, agents can autonomously choose non-autonomy.

So, autonomy, when construed as procedural autonomy, does not necessarily mean valuing autonomy.[[14]](#footnote-14) As long as the agent is self-managing, with self-management expressed through adherence to appropriate levels of competence and authorization,[[15]](#footnote-15) the agent is autonomous.

Of course, the exact identification of the conditions that best exemplify autonomy varies among theorists espousing procedural notions of autonomy. But, typically, procedural notions of autonomy stress two types of conditions: competence and authorization.[[16]](#footnote-16) In general, competence conditions demand that the choice emerge as a result of an ability to reflect independent of heteronomous or pathological forces. Authorization conditions, in general, require that the choice which emerges genuinely connect with the choosing agent in terms of the agent’s values or preferences. In order to better understand how the conditions of procedural autonomy work, consider the following two examples of procedural autonomy as advanced by two different prominent philosophers, Marilyn Friedman and John Christman.

Marilyn Friedman, integrates both types of conditions into her procedural account of autonomy. She specifies self-reflection when not impeded by distorting factors such as manipulation and deception as the threshold conditions of autonomy.[[17]](#footnote-17) In this case, self-reflection specifies the authorization condition and the absence of impediments specifies the competence condition. These procedural conditions mark the threshold of autonomy, but, according to Friedman, there is a higher level of autonomy. Procedural autonomy requires choosing within the appropriate conditions (absence of impediments and with self-reflection) but the choice of autonomy as an outcome, as a preference, value or behavior, represents a higher level of autonomy. Substantive autonomy, for Friedman, where the agent chooses autonomy itself, where the agent chooses a self-managing life and rejects deference or submission, represents a higher level of autonomy. Autonomy, Friedman observes, is a matter of degrees. For Friedman, these degrees of autonomy are apparent when an autonomous agent chooses subservience. Such an agent is procedurally autonomous although substantively non-autonomous.

Despite this assertion that the actual content (substance) of the choice indicates a higher level of autonomy, Friedman maintains a firmly procedural approach to marking the threshold to autonomy. Friedman maintains that content-neutral accounts of autonomy (procedural accounts) best respect the agent by allowing the widest possible variety of choices and lives. This respects as autonomous the agent, without diminishing the possibility of choice by predetermining worthy or non-worthy choices. Content-neutral notions of autonomy also do a better job of recognizing the autonomy of persons living in constrained or oppressive circumstances. Procedural autonomy focuses on the circumstances of the choice, the presence or absence of coercion and the process of choosing, rather than the character of the agent or the content of the choice as good or bad. This better recognizes the autonomy of those whose choices are severely constrained, but who nevertheless manage their life within the constraints of their limited or oppressive circumstances.

Freidman promotes her conception of autonomy as social. Women and men live in and through their relationships with others. Autonomy in this sense, does not merely respond to society. Friedman’s procedural approach recognizes that autonomy is also potentially socially disruptive. Society and relationships can enhance or hinder autonomy, but as importantly, autonomy can challenge those very relationships. Autonomy potentially transcends relationships to perceive not only the possibilities and limits built into those relationships, but also the possibilities beyond those very relationships. Framing her notion of autonomy as both procedural and social allows, Friedman asserts, a greater recognition of the diversity of women’s and men’s lives while still addressing the constraining impact of socialization, even oppressive socialization.

John Christman also adopts a social, procedural approach to autonomy. Christman argues that any model of autonomy must integrate an understanding of the socio-historical self. Christman, like Friedman, identifies as essential to autonomy certain levels of competence and authority (for Christman “authenticity”). The competence condition demands that the choice occur in conditions of relative independence in which that choice does not merely mirror heteronomous forces and in which the agent is capable of appraising one’s own life and history. Christman’s competence condition demands an examination of the life or choice of an agent and how that life has, or has not, been impacted by distorting, heteronomous forces.

Autonomous choice also requires “reflexive affirmation,” this is, authenticity.[[18]](#footnote-18) Reflexive affirmation requires that if a choice were to be reflected on by the agent, the agent would not be alienated from the choice itself or from the choice in how that choice emerged. Reflexive affirmation does not require wholesale reflection or even conscious reflection. The self who in her actions and in her life reflexively affirms her choices is demonstrating autonomy. Actions, values and choices which do not reveal resistance to the choice or the origins of the choice are autonomous.

In sum, both Friedman and Christman appeal to processes within the agent (e.g., reflection) which occur in a certain context (i.e., independence or competence) to explain autonomy. Both Friedman and Christman include an understanding of the agent as thoroughly social and formed over time by and through their relationships with others. For both, as long as the agent is competent and the choice demonstrates authorization, the agent chooses autonomously. Friedman and Christman share a refusal to dictate a particular notion of the good life. Both refuse to designate the content of a good choice or the character of a good life. Personal procedural autonomy leaves those conclusions to the autonomous self.

**Substantive Concerns**

As we have seen, autonomy can be understood in terms of the procedures founding choice. Recall, advocates of procedural autonomy argue that for an agent to act autonomously, s/he must have some measure of competence to choose among options and some indication of authorization. Procedural autonomy evaluates these conditions to determine whether a choice, or life, is autonomous.

Substantive accounts of autonomy deny the adequacy of procedural accounts for understanding the power and reach of oppression in altering the persons that we become, in determining the desires that we acquire and the choices that we make. They reject as inadequate content-neutral, procedural accounts of autonomy and find the content of choice itself and/or the character of the agent herself important to determining the presence of autonomy. Substantive accounts of autonomy explicitly account for oppressive socialization and adaptive preferences, that is, cases in which agents choose under psychological conditions which disallow the agent’s genuine choice (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000).

Procedural accounts of autonomy maintain that the distinction between autonomous and non-autonomous choice can be made wholly in reference to processes which occur within the agent. As long as the agent’s internal process in forming a choice is competent and authoritative, it is autonomous. In contrast, proponents of substantive autonomy argue that regardless of the form and breadth of the competence and authorization conditions, that competence, that authorization, is always tainted by the oppressive forces in society which form and mold our desires and choices. In other words, evaluating autonomy simply in terms of processes internal to the agent cannot capture the insidious, pervasive, psychological impact of oppressive socialization.

Even Christman’s reflexive affirmation condition of autonomy fails to adequately account for the pernicious impact of oppression on socialization. The competence and authorization of the agent are always bound by the forces of socialization. In failing to move beyond these conditions, in failing to move beyond the perspective of the agent herself,[[19]](#footnote-19) procedural accounts of autonomy fail to adequately account for oppressive socialization.[[20]](#footnote-20) Adaptive preferences impact the very desires of the agent, replacing authorship with mere response, with heteronomy. Advocates of procedural autonomy underestimate the pervasive systemic oppression which impacts the formation of preferences, values and choices in oppressed persons’ lives.

These conclusions reflect a fundamental intuition[[21]](#footnote-21) apparent when one looks closely at choices formed within a context of oppression. If oppression is not only material, but also psychology, forming our very person, how can choices formed within oppressive circumstances be trusted? Understanding this distrust of the autonomy of at least some choices formed in the context of oppression requires a closer look at oppression.

Iris Marion Young defines oppression as “structural phenomena that immobilize or diminish a group.”[[22]](#footnote-22) These structures diminish the possibilities of persons based upon their membership in a disadvantaged group. The structures of oppression may be material or/and psychological.[[23]](#footnote-23) For example, one might identify the gender wage gap as one indication of oppression.[[24]](#footnote-24) This wage gap disadvantages women and probably results from a number of material and psychological structural forces. Institutions that differentially pay more for stereotypical “men’s” over “women’s” work are examples of material oppression. Heterosexual family structures that differentially impact the woman’s ability to work full-time outside the home are also examples of material oppression. In both cases, oppression is a structural, material force outside the agent, constraining her choices and/or the reward for her choices.

Oppression is not only material however, it takes root in the minds of the oppressed and oppressor. Consider, occupational segregation which by some estimates accounts for 57% of the gender wage gap.[[25]](#footnote-25) Blau and Kahn observe that “Men are more likely to be in blue-collar jobs and to work in mining, construction, or durable manufacturing; they are also more likely to be in unionized employment. Women are more likely to be in clerical or professional jobs and to work in the service industry.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Overall, men are more likely to enter into professions and work in jobs that pay more. Moreover, *The U.S. Council of Economic Advisors* reports that although 57% of all bachelor degrees are awarded to women, only 35% of those degrees are in STEM fields.[[27]](#footnote-27) This results from a series of overlapping influences that begin early in the future worker’s life, including gender specific socialization. A 2012 study conducted by *The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD), an international organization dedicated to economic development, concluded that “even when boys and girls are equally proficient in mathematics and science, their attitudes towards learning and aspirations for their future are markedly different. . .”[[28]](#footnote-28)

These differences in attitude and confidence are, at least partially, the result of socialization that began before students choose a major in college or a job to pursue. One such example of this socialization can be tied to parent expectations. The 2012 OECD study notes that parents still harbor different expectations for their sons and daughters. For example, parents are more likely to expect their sons to pursue a career in the STEM fields.[[29]](#footnote-29) In sum, socialization in childhood and beyond, impacts career choice, results in occupational gender segregation and helps maintain the gender wage gap. The US Council of Economic Advisors concluded in 2015 that in terms of the gender wage gap “in many situations, the line between discrimination and preference is ambiguous.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

It is this sort of socialization which ultimately diminishes life prospects in terms of gender. The competence and authorization conditions of autonomy miss this. At that moment of choosing a major, the student may well be acting competently, i.e., independent of outside coercion and authoritatively, i.e., reflectively. But this fails to detect the profound influence of socialization, an oppressive socialization that differentially impacts men and women.

If choice responds to psychological oppression, we have reason to suspect those choices. Natalie Stoljar offers an example of internalized oppression that results from oppressive sexual norms. Stoljar cites a study by Kristin Luker to demonstrate the impact of norms acquired in childhood on the adult decision-making process. This study investigated, via interviews and surveys of women with unwanted pregnancies, why contraception did not prevent those unwanted pregnancies. These interviews revealed that the woman’s choice to use (or neglect) contraception was influenced by sexual norms disapproving of women’s sexual activity and agency as well as norms tying self-worth to pregnancy and motherhood. These norms resulted from oppressive socialization which the agent internalized well before the actual decision to use or not to use contraceptives.[[31]](#footnote-31) Oppressive socialization produces choices and desires which respond to and adapt to that socialization. Procedural autonomy never adequately accounts for this.

Substantive accounts of autonomy are commonly distinguished as strong substantive or weak substantive. Strong substantive accounts argue that autonomy is not merely the product of particular specified processes, but is also manifested in the product, the choice itself. For advocates of strong substantive autonomy, autonomy necessitates not only the appropriate conditions of choice, it also demands actually living autonomously. Some choices are simply, by their nature, non-autonomous. Natalie Stoljar’s examination of autonomy discussed above is an example of a strong substantive account of autonomy. Stoljar explains that only a theory of autonomy which “places restrictions on the content of the agents’ preferences”[[32]](#footnote-32) can account for oppressive socialization.

Marina Oshana articulates a vigorous account of strong substantive autonomy. Oshana argues that autonomy not only disallows certain choices but also demands the actual exercise of autonomy throughout the agent’s life: “A person who abdicates his choices is not fully autonomous, even if his choice-making capacity remains intact.”[[33]](#footnote-33) This does not demand that every choice or action that an agent takes be fully autonomous, but rather that the life of the agent is one of overall self-management in terms of processes internal to the agent and conditions external to the agent.[[34]](#footnote-34) Assessing autonomy requires not only an evaluation of competence and authority conditions internal to the agent but also an evaluation of the lived experience of the agent in the variety of relationships in which that agent participates. Autonomy requires living autonomously.

For Oshana, “to be autonomous is to stand in a certain position of authority over one’s life, notably with respect to others.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Autonomy requires an autonomous approach to life overall and the actual act of living autonomously. An agent cannot autonomously choose subservience even if this choice demonstrates competence and authority. Abdicating one’s own authority and adopting a life deference, as in the cases of the willing slave or the deferential housewife, can never be an example of autonomy. In this way, Oshana, and other advocates of strong substantive accounts of autonomy, incorporate a certain perfectionism into their understanding of autonomy – conclude that some choices or lives are better than other independent of the agent’s determination.[[36]](#footnote-36) Substantive accounts label some ways of life as necessarily non-autonomous regardless of the agent’s perspective - - a perspective which may be tainted by adaptive preferences.

Weak substantive accounts of autonomy occupy a middle ground between the perfectionism of strong substantive accounts and the content neutral conclusions of procedural accounts of autonomy.[[37]](#footnote-37) Weak substantive accounts of autonomy refrain from designating particular goods or bad choices, but do require a particular attitude or demeanor in the agent. Charles calls these weak substantive approaches “supplemental” in that they add requirements about the relationship of the agent to her self that are necessary for the competency and authorization procedures to yield autonomous results.[[38]](#footnote-38) Advocates of weak substantive autonomy find procedural accounts inadequate to understanding the psychologically damaging effect of oppressive socialization but also find strong substantive accounts unnecessarily dictatorial in terms of proscribed lives and choices. In order to account for the destructive impact of oppressive socialization on the agent’s ability to choose and live autonomously, advocates of weak substantive accounts of autonomy require that the agent demonstrate characteristics which make evident her ability to choose independent of oppressive socialization.[[39]](#footnote-39)

For example, Paul Benson designates “attitudinal aspects”[[40]](#footnote-40) as essential to assessing autonomy. Whereas a strong substantive account imposes normative restrictions on choice or on ways of life, Benson’s weak substantive theory of autonomy integrates normative considerations in terms of the agent’s relationship to herself. Specifically, agents must take ownership for their actions or choices in order for those actions or choices to be considered autonomous. Thus, full autonomy can never be realized by persons “who adopt preferences or attitudes that are incompatible with such self-regard.”[[41]](#footnote-41) This understanding of autonomy exposes the autonomy inhibiting character of many norms of femininity. Oppressive social norms which dictate deference or submission can never be autonomous even when internalized and supported by the agent herself.

Both strong and weak accounts of substantive autonomy recognize that relationships constitute autonomy. Relationships not only cause autonomy in that they provide the context within which autonomy emerges, relationships constitute autonomy in that autonomy is realized within and through our relationships with others. In this way, both strong and weak substantive accounts of autonomy identify the willing slave as non-autonomous regardless of the procedures founding the choice.[[42]](#footnote-42)

**A Temporal Procedural Approach**

To summarize, while both procedural and substantive accounts of autonomy prize autonomy, procedural accounts find substantive accounts unnecessarily perfectionist, while substantive accounts find procedural accounts inadequate. Each side fears that the other actually obstructs autonomy, by limiting choice (substantive autonomy) or by failing to recognize oppression (procedural autonomy). In this section, I propose a procedural understanding of autonomy that integrates a sustained concern for the temporal nature of autonomy. By looking at choice as an ongoing phenomena, grounded in the past, realized in the present and extending into the future, the appropriate procedural conditions of competence and authorization can better detect oppressive socialization, while continuing to avoid perfectionism. Ultimately, I argue, extending these procedural conditions into the future reveals why the willing slave (or the deferential housewife) may violate the foundational principles of autonomy, even on procedural terms.

Recall, procedural accounts of autonomy look to levels of competence and authorization to assess autonomy. Competence conditions of procedural autonomy demand that the agent’s choice emerge from an ability to choose free from external coercion, cognitive pathology or manipulation. Authorization conditions of autonomy point to the connection between the agent and the choice and demands that the choice connect to the agent in terms of the his life, values, reflection or actions.

The competence condition apprehends the difference between autonomy and heteronomy. For a choice be competent, it must not be able to be wholly traced to some force external to the agent.[[43]](#footnote-43) According to Christman, the choice may not merely regurgitate socially inculcated values or some psychological pathology suffered by the agent in their current situation or in their past. Colburn identifies the competence dimension of autonomy with independence. In Colburn’s terms, independence requires that the choice manifest an ability to choose “for herself”[[44]](#footnote-44) For both Christman and Colburn competence requires a degree of independence from coercion, whether that coercion be institutional, economic or psychological.

The authorization condition of autonomy requires an awareness, conscious or unconscious, of the value or choice. Authorization conditions connect the choosing agent with the choice through some sort of reflection or endorsement. For example, Andrea Westlund proposes dialogical reflection as the thread that connects the autonomous agent to the eventual choice, value or life.[[45]](#footnote-45) Dialogical reflection requires that the autonomous agent engage, at some level, perspectives other than her own. The agent must be able to imagine otherwise, other choices, other actions, other lives.[[46]](#footnote-46) Westlund describes dialogical reflection as a disposition “to hold oneself answerable to external critical perspectives.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Dialogical reflection does not demand that the agent actually survey all possible alternatives, answer the objections, or embrace autonomy as a value in itself, but it does demand that the agent possess a disposition which recognizes the choice, even the choice to submit, as a choice and not merely an ordained outcome. It is this dialogical reflection which “makes a choice or an action an agent’s own.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Whereas the competence condition of procedural autonomy tests for independence and heteronomy, authorization conditions, such as dialogical reflection, positively connect the agent to the choice.

Dialogical reflection manifests itself in the agent’s disposition as receptiveness to dialogue about one’s choices, although that dialogue may be internal to the agent, imaginary or actual. Automatic, unthinking dismissal of alternative possibilities and challenging stimuli does not qualify as dialogically reflective. The subject who automatically defers to the choices of her husband, demonstrating a lack of willingness to engage any alternative other than deference, whose justificatory dialogue does not move beyond her spouse’s conclusions, is not dialogically reflective. Justificatory dialogue which always falls back on another person’s conclusions, religious dogma or society pressures to explain a choice, does not demonstrate self-management. Genuine choice demands not only the availability of options but also an awareness of options. After all, personal autonomy is, by definition, self-management.

Westlund describes this dialogical reflection as constitutively relational yet non-perfectionist. It is relational in that it demands a disposition internal to the agent that perceives and accounts for perspectives outside of the agent. It is non-perfectionist in that it is a formal condition (as opposed to substantive condition) which does not impose any particular outcome or choice. It does not pre-reflection label as non-autonomous, for example, deference. Dialogical reflection relies on the definition of autonomy (self-management) to set the limits of autonomy, not an independent assessment of what is good or worthwhile and what is not.[[49]](#footnote-49) As Westlund describes, “To put it somewhat paradoxically, we don’t need to embrace our own answerability, we just need actually to be self-answerable.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

**Competence and Dialogical Reflection Realized across Time**

It is these two procedural conditions of autonomy to which I appeal: competence and dialogical reflection. These conditions, juxtaposed with temporal considerations, can best detect oppressive socialization and expose how the phenomena of the willing slave is not autonomous on procedural terms, that is, without resorting to perfectionist conclusions.

Many theorist of autonomy have noted the importance of temporal considerations in assessing autonomy. In 1990, Walker expounded on the importance of accounting for both immanent preferences and causal history in evaluating autonomy. Both Oshana and Mackenzie, substantive autonomy theorists referenced above, elaborate the necessity of looking at the history of a choice in identifying deficits of autonomy. Mackenzie notes the necessity of considering “whether the process of formation of the preferences corresponds to an autonomy undermining process.”[[51]](#footnote-51) For Oshana, the history of the agent’s desires and preferences plays a “navigational role” in the actualization of autonomy which cannot be accounted for by simply adding a historical criterion or refining a particular condition, as she believes proceduralist accounts do.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Christman, however, articulates a procedural account of autonomy which thoroughly incorporates an understanding of choice as the product of a historical process. Christman explicitly rejects a time-slice approach to autonomy.[[53]](#footnote-53) The autonomous self, for Christman, is constituted through the formation of narratives. Autonomy represents a “process of socially mediated self-interpretation”[[54]](#footnote-54) in which identity is formed through a self actively and reactively composing narratives about itself, its relationship to the world and its relationship to its own history.

These narratives provide the foundation for understanding and examining human agency and choice. Christman understands human agency as a process occurring over time. His authenticity condition requires that if a choice were to be reflected on by the agent, the agent would not be alienated from the choice itself or from the choice in how that choice emerged. Resistance, or alienation, can be manifested through feelings, emotions, actions, or thoughts which reveal a failure to identify with, resist, or disdain, the choice, preference or value. Resistance can be directed toward the choice itself or toward the origins of the choice.

For example, one may autonomously choose to commit oneself to a monogamous relationship with one partner. One may reflectively endorse this relationship and one may even explicitly declare the conclusion of those reflections in some sort of public ceremony. Or one may reflexively endorse the relationship through one’s actions and continuing evidence of commitment without ever explicitly reflecting on the choice or publicly declaring the choice. The autonomy in the later circumstance is located in the reflexive affirmation of the commitment, and the origins of the commitment, as it is demonstrated over time and as it would be apparent to the agent if she were to reflect on it. But, resistance to the commitment or the origins of the commitment, as might be apparent in the emotions or actions of the agent toward the partner, or might be apparent in feelings of being manipulated or deceived, reveal a deficit of autonomy. It is in this way that Christman moves beyond a time-slice approach to autonomy.

Christman’s temporal procedural account of autonomy does not satisfy his “substantive” critics. In relying on the perspective of the agent in evaluating the choice, i.e., non-alienation, it fails to recognize the limits of that perspective. Non-alienation relies on the agent’s perspective to assess autonomy,[[55]](#footnote-55) and the agent’s perspective may be tainted by oppressive socialization. For example, the lack of alienation in regard to an arranged marriage may merely reflect oppressive norms ingrained in the subject via socialization. Thus, Christman’s approach fails to move beyond the effect of oppressive socialization on the agent’s life, choices, desires and actions.

Moreover, Christman’s concept of authenticity as non-alienation may incorrectly label some autonomous lives or choices as non-autonomous. Afterall, many of us are alienated from key aspects of our lives, but rather than renounce those aspects, we weave our autonomy around them. Oshana argues that “Authenticity of the sort relevant to autonomy involves owning up to but not necessarily endorsing one’s legacy of commitments.”[[56]](#footnote-56) One example Oshana offers is that of David Kaczynski, who led the FBI to his brother Ted, the Unabomber. David was both alienated from the need to inform on his brother and exercising autonomy when he did so. Or, consider the life and choices of a career-oriented, devoted mother.[[57]](#footnote-57) The tensions between these two commitments is likely to create a tension in the agent’s life. She often weighs these conflicting commitments in daily and life choices. She might at the same time repudiate the need to juggle these commitments without being alienated from her own ultimate choices. In sum, even when procedural accounts of autonomy adopt a foundationally historical approach to autonomy, procedural accounts seem to miss the defining character of oppression and adopt a concept of authenticity which requires an inhuman level of coherence.

One way to get around these perspectival problems with procedural accounts of autonomy is to conceive of autonomy as occurring on a timeline, which examines the conditions of competence and dialogical reflection in real time, as they occurred in the past, as they are maintained and as they extend into the future. A timeline captures the experience of the subject moving through linear time, past, present and future. Unlike an autobiographical approach which is always time bound, a product of the perspective of the agent in one “slice” of time, my approach looks for competence and dialogical reflection as it occurs across time, ebbing and flowing. Looking at the competence and dialogical reflection of the agent at the very inception of a choice will reveal the lack of competence and/or dialogical reflection that results from oppression before it is internalized. My approach suggests that we look at the multiple causal and justificatory phases of autonomy in order to assess autonomy.

This approach takes very seriously the notion that autonomy is a matter of degrees, actualized over time, in the past, present and future of the agent. To detect oppressive socialization, procedural accounts of autonomy must evaluate the competence and dialogical reflection of a choice at the acquisition of the choice, in multiple points of maintenance, and extending through the future of the agent.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Multiple Moments at Acquisition of**  **Choice or Value** | **Multiple Moments in Maintenance of**  **Choice or Value** | **Multiple Moments in Future of Choice or Value** |
| **Competence**  **Condition** | *Preference/choice acquired independent of psychological manipulation or external coercion.* | *Preference/choice retained independent of psychological manipulation or external coercion* | *Preference/choice does not inhibit possibility of independence in the future* |
| **Dialogical Reflection**  **Condition** | *Preference/choice integrates dialogical reflection at inception.* | *Preference/choice integrates dialogical reflection in retention.* | *Preference/choice does not inhibit possibility of dialogical reflection in the future* |

Evaluating the autonomy of a choice requires an examination of the history, maintenance and future of that choice in real time. Consider the following example. A young woman enters college choosing a major in nursing. Her choice may be assessed via a consideration of the competence and dialogical reflection present at that moment. Did she choose as a result of psychological manipulation? Did she demonstrate an awareness of alternatives? Engage other possibilities? We might answer yes. This is a moderately independent young woman, who often listens, but also sometimes rejects the advice of others. She surveyed the options, weighing some, rejecting them. Indeed this choice of nursing lines up nicely with the narrative she has composed of her life. When she looks back, she is comfortable with the pressures exerted on her by her parents, friends and/or and society in terms of nursing as a career option.

But, if we move back on the timeline, to the initial moments in which the choice is rooted, we might find the conditions of independence and/or dialogical reflection to indicate less autonomy. We might find that the girl is surrounded by social forces directing her to nursing: the nurse Barbie Doll, the applause for hands-on help with a sick sibling, her high school guidance counselor, all in unison directing her choice. She unthinkingly accepts the Barbie Doll, never considers the options. Only by assessing the competence and dialogical refection as actualized in the past, can we gain insight into those autonomy impairing forces.

Does that mean that her later choice of nursing as a major is not autonomous? Not necessarily. But, it does indicate that autonomy is a matter of degrees, and certainly these early circumstances impact the degree of autonomy. Recall, Friedman also notes that autonomy is a matter of degrees. For Friedman, the degree of autonomy is related to the procedural / substantive divide. Procedural autonomy marks the threshold of autonomy; the substance of the choice marks a higher level of autonomy. My model of autonomy does not resort to substantive conclusions to demarcate the degrees of autonomy, rather it looks at the choice as it evolves over time.

Of course, this agent may autonomously choose nursing as a major despite the prior forces leading to that choice. She may prefer the holistic, hands-on approach to healthcare and the patient contact. She may choose this in light of the alternatives. Or, she may non-autonomously drift into the major, yet later come to understand and embrace the role over other alternatives. All of these scenarios illustrate the complexities of assessing autonomy. Ultimately, assessing autonomy demands assessing levels of competence and dialogical reflection over multiple periods of time.

Consider the earlier discussion regarding the gender wage gap. Women tend to choose careers that pay less. This can be explained in terms of material and psychological oppression. Looking at the choice of the woman at the moment in which she chooses that clerical job over that construction job will not capture the internalized norms which prompted her choice. She may indeed choose competently and reflectively. But, looking to the roots of that choice, back in time, when the choice was founded, when she was discouraged from playing with trucks or offered a baby doll as opposed to a tool set, may reveal a lack of both competence and reflection.

This timeline approach provides insight into the oppressive forces at work over an agent’s lifetime, forces that were once external to her, but have been internalized into her person and perspective. The agent’s current demonstration of competence and dialogical reflection must be understood in light of the blind acceptance of roles and indoctrinated choices of the past. This approach demands an evaluation of competence and dialogical reflection over time, as well as, the social forces of oppression that obstruct autonomy.

This timeline approach helps explain the phenomena of alienation and its relationship to autonomy. Consider a woman who embraces her own arranged marriage but rejects the possibility of an arranged marriage for her daughter. This woman treasures the partnership she has formed with her spouse. She competently and with dialogical reflection makes choices and moves into her future with her spouse. But, although she might not be able to articulate why she doesn’t want the same arrangement for her daughter, she manifests alienation toward the origins of her own marriage by rejecting it as an option for her daughter. She rejects the coercion forcing her hand at the inception of her marriage but accepts, even celebrates, the marriage itself. This timeline approach captures the experience of an agent moving through time, between circumstance of more and less oppression, of alienation and autonomy without trying to reduce them to their manifestation at one point in time. Consider, I may be alienated from key aspects of my own identity: my slow-metabolism, my tendency to over-analyze, my desire to sleep late. But, these are not examples of my lack of autonomy, but part and parcel of my autonomous life. Alienation is not necessarily anathema to autonomy when autonomy is understood as occurring over time.

This timeline approach provides a route to respecting the autonomous agent’s choice in the present without erasing the oppressive forces of the past. The appropriate competence and authenticity requirements can capture oppressive socialization if those conditions are assessed across time, past and present. It can capture the reality of oppression without restricting the agent’s choice in the present time.

But, if this timeline approach allows insight into the degrees of autonomy without resorting to substantive conclusions, what is the threshold to autonomy, the point demarcating autonomy from non-autonomy? Clearly, liberal society recognizes the adult as the best possible manifestation of the autonomous person. The current person is the best expression of the realization of autonomy over time, a person coming to know and express herself over time. To be sure, agents may suffer losses of autonomy, structural and psychological, over the course of their life. Looking back to the history of the agent and his choices allows insight into autonomy impairing circumstances without labeling that choice as either fully autonomous or non-autonomous. Rather every choice lays someplace on a spectrum between perfect autonomy and perfect coercion. This approach which conceives of autonomy as a spectrum moving from perfect autonomy to perfect non-autonomy offers conceptual footing for liberal society to address autonomy impairing circumstances while still recognizing the autonomy of the agent’s choice at that moment. It neither erases oppressive socialization over the life of the agent nor places substantive limits on the autonomy of the agent.

**Willing Slaves and Deferential Housewives**

John Stuart Mill famously posed the problem for both liberals and feminists. In *On Liberty*, he argues, “The principle of liberty does not require that he should be free not to be free.”[[58]](#footnote-58) This prompts the following questions: Does autonomy include the option of abdicating autonomy? Does autonomy necessarily conflict with submission? deference? Mill understands the significance of this dilemma in the fight for women’s liberty. In *The Subjection of Women* he points to the many historical attempts to “enslave” women’s “minds.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Oppression produces willing slaves, and deferential housewives. Preferences and choices are sometimes merely responses to the unconscious acceptance of oppressive social norms. As Benson points out, many women internalize oppressive norms regarding appropriate femininity which can not only be tied to their past but also impacts their future. Can an agent choose submission that extends into the future? that binds them in terms of submission?

Substantive accounts of autonomy argue no. Some choices are non-autonomous independent of the competence and reflective conditions which guided them. Beyond choosing autonomously, choices must be restricted to those produced by particular types of agents or to those that actually correspond with living autonomously. Charles summarizes, “It is the nature of servility that raises the feminist intuition, because it . . . replicates oppressive norms about femininity.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

Procedural accounts, however, fear these restrictions and demand a focus on choosing autonomously itself. Conceiving of autonomy as extending through the past and present into the future[[61]](#footnote-61) may resolve some of this conflict between substantive and procedural accounts.

Understanding autonomy demands an examination of the agent’s autonomy, the conditions of competence and dialogical reflection, which extends into the future. This timeline approach looks not only at competence and dialogical reflection as it occurred in the past, as it is manifested in the present but also how it impacts in the future. Considering a person as a future autonomous agent helps shed light on the procedural problems with the notion of a willing slave or deferential housewife. It is the future lack of competence and dialogical reflection of the agent which determines the lack of autonomy of the willing slave, not the choice of submission or deference in itself.

Mill recognized this. The problem with slavery is not as much the submission, but the future: “By selling himself into slavery, he abdicates his liberty; he foregoes any future use of it beyond the single act.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Thus, for Mill, and for the procedural, time-line approach to autonomy I propose here, autonomy allows servility, deference and submission. It does not allow slavery if by slavery we mean involuntary submission now or in the future. But, it does allow the agent to voluntarily choose submissiom over time and under conditions that manifest autonomy. Thus, the willing slave would have to continually will their enslavement beyond inception and throughout maintenance for that choice to be considered autonomous. If slavery, by definition, abdicates autonomy into the future, then slavery does not meet the demands of procedural autonomy. The deferential housewife would have to always maintain an option not to defer in order for the choice to defer to be considered autonomous. In this way, procedural approaches to autonomy can meet at least some of the concerns of substantive autonomy.

This temporal procedural approach to autonomy allows an agent to submit in the moment, but designates as non-autonmous any choice that relinquishes future competence or dialogical reflection. I may submit autonomously in the moment. I may choose to defer to the choices of another, or to a perceived higher power, as long as I do so competently and with dialogical reflection. But, procedural autonomy values autonomy overtime, the autonomy of the future agent as well. At the next moment, and all future possible moments, the agent may reclaim the actual active expression of autonomy. The agent must continue to competently and reflectively choose her deference as she moves forward. The agent may conjecture that she will continue to defer, and she may actually continue to defer overtime, but she must continually affirm that choice if it is to continue to be considered autonomous. Autonomy is matter of degrees. An agent who assertively chooses her deference over time is more autonomous than an agent who slips into habitual deference lacking competence and/or reflection.

None of this erases the oppressive circumstances that may have led to the choice. Autonomy requires a perspective on the trajectory of the choice from past, in the present and toward the future. Persons and societies that value autonomy can use this timeline approach to pursue autonomy, recognizing and confronting oppression as it occurred and impacted choice in the past, celebrating and maximizing autonomy in the present and protecting autonomy in the future.

Conclusion

If liberalism values autonomy, limiting autonomy will not promote it. This suggested focus on the context and operation of autonomy over time, as opposed to a focus on the substance of autonomous choices, allows insight into the forces impeding autonomy without limiting the scope the autonomy. Evaluating a choice within the context in which it occurred and in term of the conditions apparent in the act of choosing will shed light on forces obstructing autonomy, forces which may be both material and psychological. Identifying these coercive forces allows an attack on the material and/or psychological forces oppression while avoiding perfectionism.

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1. Dworkin 1988, pp. 12-25. See also, Friedman 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hill 1995, pp 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Waldron 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Christman 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Colburn 2008, 619 identifies (personal) autonomy as deciding “for oneself what is of value, and living one’s life in accordance with that decision . . .” (p. 619). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Locke 1996, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mill 1989, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, among others, Eisenstein 1981, Jaggar 1983; MacKinnon 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sandel 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Friedman 2003, p. 81 describes recent feminist philosophy as having a “love-hate relationship with autonomy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Nedelsky 1989, pp. 7-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Frankfurt 1988 and Dworkin1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Colburn 2010, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Many scholars refer to the companion condition of procedural autonomy which works alongside competence as the “authenticity” condition. I prefer “authorization” in that this characterization better includes manifestations of this condition which do not rely heavily on reflection to indicate “authenticity”. Westlund 2009, p. 30 refers to an agents “authorization” of desires. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Christman 2005b, p. 278, refers to competence and authenticity requirements. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Friedman 2003, p. 5-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Christman 2005b, p. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See also Charles 2010, p. 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Paul Benson 2005b, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Oshana 2006, p. 1 and Stoljar 2000. See also Charles 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Young 1990, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cudd 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The Obama Administration estimated that the typical woman employed full-time throughout the year earned 79 cents for every dollar a man working full-time, year-round made. The White House, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Blau and Kahn 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. US Council of Economic Advisers 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. OECD 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 137-140. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. US Council of Economic Advisors 2015, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Stoljar 2000, p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Oshana 2006, p. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Oshana 2007, p.421. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Christman 2004, p. 152. Christman finds substantive autonomy to be perfectionist. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Benson 2005a, p. 125 describes his weakly substantive account of autonomy as occupying “a largely neglected middle ground between strong substantive theories and content-neutral conceptions of autonomy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Charles 2010, p. 411. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Sperry 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Benson 2005b, p.119. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Benson 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Stoljar 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Christman 2005b, p. 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Colburn 2010, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Christman 2011 argues that Westlund’s dialogical reflection condition is best understood as a competence condition, rather than an authorization condition. I disagree. Dialogical reflection connects the agent to the value or choice in a way that mere competence does not. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Christman 2005, p. 280 identifies the following standard, “A person reflects adequately if she is able to realistically imagine choosing otherwise . . . “ [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Westlund 2009, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Christman 2014 makes this distinction when he explains that “certain value commitments are required for autonomy because of core conditions of autonomy . . . not because such commitments are inherently valid or justified” (p. 216). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Westlund 2011, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Mackenzie 2014, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Oshana 2006, pp. 12 and 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Christman 2009, p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Baumann 2008, p. 449. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Oshana 2007, p. 426. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Oshana 2007 gives the example of a woman CEO. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Mill 1989, p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., p. 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Charles 2010, p. 416. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Baumann 2008, p. 460, refers to the agent as a “temporally extended self” and explains “that whether a person has the relevant competencies cannot be determined at some time. One must look at the manner in which she lives her life over time.” [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Mill 1989, p. 103. See Galeotti 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)