Autonomy and Agency: A Feminist Approach

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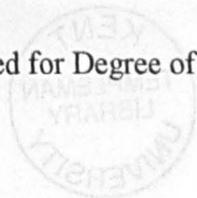
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Historically the relationship between feminist theory and the concept of autonomy has been troubled; feminists have both advocated autonomy as a necessary tool for women's emancipation and rejected it as an inherently masculinist ideal that serves no purpose in feminist theory.

My Thesis begins by examining those concepts of autonomy found in mainstream philosophical theory: namely Kant's theory of moral autonomy and the procedural and hierarchical approaches of Dworkin, Frankfurt and Christman. I then move on to consider feminist criticisms of these understandings of autonomy including metaphysical, symbolic and care critiques which are developed by writers such as Baier, Code and Gilligan.

An influential feminist criticism of autonomy, the poststructuralist critique of the subject, argues that it is not possible to understand ourselves as having a unified self. Instead the self is decentred and fragmented. Writers like Weedon, Butler and Lloyd support such an approach but Benhabib argues that this account of the self makes it impossible to develop a concept of autonomy necessary for feminist politics.

In response to these arguments I propose a narrative understanding of the self based on the work of Paul Ricoeur. According to this, the self is decentred but not fragmented. I then argue that this understanding of identity is strong enough to support an account of autonomy that is sensitive to those feminist concerns discussed in earlier chapters .This is because it is only in its traditional understandings that autonomy is problematic.

In this way, and drawing on Meyers, I argue for an approach that understands autonomy as a set of learned competencies. However, unlike Meyers, I argue autonomy is weakly substantive, not purely procedural. This substantive, relational, competency account of autonomy, I conclude, is compatible with a decentred narrative identity and answers those feminist concerns with traditional understandings of autonomy.

Contents

Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by thanking my supervisor, Professor Sean Sayers, for his infinite patience, understanding, encouragement and support throughout the writing of this Thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Todd Mei for his very helpful comments on my fourth chapter and for his assistance generally while I got to grips with Ricoeur. Finally, and on a more personal note, I would like to thank Neil, Rowan, Evan, Daniel and Robin for putting up with my madcap idea to write a PhD thesis in the first place and for still being there at the end!

Autonomy and Agency: An Introduction

Over the past four years I have often come away from reading books or articles with the nagging doubt that many believe that feminist engagements with theories and concepts of autonomy have run their course, that there is nothing new left to say, a real sense of having 'been there, done that'. I think this feeling is then compounded by feminism's unpopularity in the wider culture. Even a passing acquaintance with the opinion pieces of the British press is enough to tell you that increasing numbers of women, of all ages and backgrounds, are unwilling to actively identify themselves as feminists. This has been my experience too in conversations with female friends; feminism is viewed as the domain of strident viragos trying to tell women how to lead their lives, the old stereotype of an angry, vituperative woman is, unfortunately, still very much alive. Though when pushed in these conversations such women do identify with core feminist beliefs in aiming for an equal and emancipated society, they just do not identify themselves as feminist. So it is, therefore, that I have experienced those moments, when I tell people that I am writing a thesis based on feminist philosophy and the concept of autonomy, of silence and pause in which non-academics wait for me to start haranguing them and academics wonder why I am dragging that old potato back out. So, why am I? Why am I writing on autonomy and agency from a feminist perspective?

Autonomy is a concept that has a long and complicated history within philosophical thought and feminist philosophers' engagement with this concept so far forms, in relative terms, one short and brief chapter in its overall development as a concept. To think then that feminist thought could have possibly hoped to have fully explored and developed all the possible avenues of inquiry open in relation to autonomy seems to me to smack highly of a rather unfortunate arrogance or a desire to dismiss

such ideas before they even begin. Rather it seems to me that there is still a large amount of work to be done in understanding autonomy in terms of gender roles and relations. Furthermore, to suggest that we can know and understand all there is on any one given topic or concept is, I would argue, to subscribe to a mistaken universalism or essentialism. It follows then that to ignore the fact that as gender roles and relations change and alter, which they have undoubtedly done over the past forty or fifty years since the advent of First Wave feminism, so we need to re-address and re-assess our understandings of autonomy and agency in terms of these changes. Therefore, I think, there is still work to be done, from a theoretical feminist perspective, on autonomy and its agency and hence my thesis.

To this end then my Thesis begins in Chapter One (Kantian and Procedural Accounts of Autonomy) by considering the historical development of the concept of autonomy through Locke and Rousseau to Kant's theories of moral autonomy. As will become clear I do not think it is possible to discuss modern day conceptions of autonomy or indeed the impetus for most feminist critiques of autonomy without recognising the influence of Kant's arguments on the debate. Therefore I spend some time in the first chapter writing on Kant before moving on to consider how theories of autonomy have moved from being purely moral theories to ones of personal autonomy. This then leads me to look at the arguments of Frankfurt, Dworkin and Christman who have all proposed theories of personal autonomy that are generally described as being either hierarchical or procedural. I end Chapter One by considering some possible criticisms of these formulations of autonomy and in particular that criticism that has become known as the Problem of Manipulation which is of particular interest to feminist autonomy theorists.

Having concluded Chapter One by indicating at least one way in which feminist

theorists have been critical of mainstream philosophical conceptions of autonomy Chapter Two (Feminist Critiques and Concerns) is a more considered and fully developed approach that encompasses a number of feminist critiques of autonomy. In order to structure this chapter more helpfully I have used the five feminist critiques of autonomy as identified by Mackenzie and Stoljar in their introduction to their edited collection *Relational Autonomy*. These critiques are the metaphysical, the symbolic, the care, the post-modern and the diversity. Particular attention is paid in this chapter to the first three of these critiques because I argue that the last two groups of arguments, the post modern and diversity, are centred around what has come to be known as the critique of the subject and therefore, because of my broad sympathy towards the claims of this approach, deserve to be analysed in some depth.

My third chapter (Post-Structuralist Subjects and Feminist Agents) is, therefore, a prolonged and in- depth discussion of those post-structural critiques of the subject as provided by, amongst others, Lacan, Derrida and Foucault. In order to achieve this I spend some time discussing these arguments and considering their not inconsiderable influence on some areas of feminist theory concerning subjectivity and agency, as seen in the works of thinkers such as Judith Butler and María Lugones. Towards the end of the chapter however I also begin to discuss the, very reasonable, reticence of some feminist thinkers to accept the critique of the subject. I conclude by arguing that there are convincing arguments made by both sides of this debate and that what, I believe, is required is a conception of agency that is decentred and that yet is capable of remaining cohesive and coherent.

In order to construct such an account of agency I suggest, in Chapter Four (Narrative Identity), that the best way to do so is to look to theories of narrative identity. I begin by examining those theories of narrative that are found in the works of Alasdair

MacIntyre and Charles Taylor before arguing that while the arguments developed by these thinkers have their merits, the best account of narrative identity is to be found in the works of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur's work is complex and incorporates a host of ideas, so that in discussing his conception of narrative identity it is necessary also to understand his theories of time, mimesis, *ipse* and *idem* identity and emplotment. I discuss all of these ideas of Ricoeur's before moving on to consider John Christman's and Galen Strawson's arguments against such ideas of narrativity. Ultimately I conclude that Ricoeur's conception of narrativity is strong enough for me to then move on finally to consider what account of autonomy should be adopted in light of my arguments so far.

In the fifth and final chapter (Narrative Identity and Autonomous Agency), I argue that having established that a narrative account of identity is capable of answering my call for a decentred yet coherent agent that I am now in a position to identify a theory of autonomy that is sensitive to the feminist critiques of Chapter Two. In developing such an account I look not only at Ricoeur's own arguments for autonomy but I also draw strongly on Diana Meyers' arguments for a competency based account of autonomous agency. However, I then differ from Meyers by arguing for a weakly substantive account of autonomy that should also be understood as constitutively relational. Throughout this chapter, and indeed my whole Thesis, I also consider those theorists who would disagree with such a position and defend my arguments accordingly. Therefore by the time I reach the Conclusion I am in a position whereby I have developed and argued for an account of agency and autonomy that answers these critics and that I believe offers a promising avenue for further developments in feminist philosophical theory.

Chapter 1: Kantian and Procedural Accounts of Autonomy

It is often customary to start a piece of research by trying to define what it is that you are going to be writing and arguing about. Naturally over the course of researching this thesis I have read many books and articles concerned with the concept of autonomy and many of these have begun with a definition. I see no good reason not to follow suit except for the fact that nobody seems able to agree and therefore most of the pieces of work that I have read have started from differing positions. There does not seem to be any clear consensus on what autonomy is and so I find myself agreeing (up to a point) with Dworkin when he argues that the idea of autonomy has been equated sometimes with:

> liberty, sometimes as equivalent to self-rule or sovereignty [and], sometimes as identical with freedom of the will. It is equated with dignity, integrity, individuality, independence, responsibility, and self-knowledge. It is identified with qualities of self-assertion, with critical reflection, with freedom from obligation, with absence of external causation, with knowledge of one's own interests. [...] It is related to actions, to beliefs, to reasons for acting, to rules, to the will of other persons, to thoughts and to principles. About the only features held constant from one author to another are that autonomy is a feature of persons and that it is a desirable quality to have.[1]

It is perhaps easier to see why autonomy is a desirable quality than to pin it down with a strict definition. To be considered autonomous carries such significance for philosophers because recognising an individual as an autonomous agent has considerable normative value. Individuals who are considered autonomous are, in turn, entitled to respect, their actions and their choices are protected from interference and intervention and they are allowed to participate in the political processes and decisions of their communities.[2] As Holroyd argues:

> It is because an agent is autonomous that she deserves a kind of respect; it is because she is autonomous that her actions and choices ought not to be interfered with or her choices overridden (other than in exceptional circumstances); and that she is autonomous means that an agent's

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[1] Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1988), p. 6
[2] Jules Holroyd, 'Relational Autonomy and Paternalistic Interventions,' *Res Publica*, Vol.15 No. 4 (2009), 321-336 (p.322)

decisions and views should be taken seriously in political processes.[3]

In the light of these arguments it would seem self-explanatory as to why feminist theorists, in trying to develop a strong emancipatory politics, would want to argue that women should be accorded the status of fully autonomous agents. However, as is so often the case in philosophy, it is not as simple as that. As I indicated above I am only in partial agreement with the quote taken from Dworkin. I agree with him until he states that, 'about the only features held constant from one author to another are that autonomy is a feature of persons and that it is a desirable quality to have.' Even a passing acquaintance with feminist theorising on autonomy should inform Dworkin that there are plenty of authors who do not hold such a positive view of autonomy and its role in feminist philosophy. Indeed in the same year as Dworkin was writing this passage Sarah Lucia Hoagland was denouncing autonomy as a 'thoroughly noxious concept.'[4] While I do not agree with Hoagland either I think her comments are worth noting as the first warning bell that autonomy and its desirability are not automatic givens within feminist philosophy.

The aim of this Thesis is not to add to this confusion over the definition of autonomy but through careful and clear attention to try to chart a course through this plethora of ideas. In doing so I will be focusing on those feminist arguments that challenge those conceptions of autonomy that ignore, or fail to address fully, the difficulties faced by women in fulfilling standard or traditional philosophical concepts of this ideal. Examining these arguments will also mean thinking about who is it that is capable of being considered autonomous and asking whether the kind of a self that is entailed in traditional accounts of autonomy can answer this question satisfactorily. I will also be thinking about whether such accounts can or should be maintained in

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[3] Holroyd, p. 322
[4] Sarah Lucia Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics. Toward New Value* (Paolo Alt, Cal., Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988), pp. 144-5

light of feminist criticism.

Trying to define a feminist conception of autonomy considered fit for the twenty-first century would be problematic and overly ambitious at this early stage in my Thesis. Tracing its historical development should however prove to be a little easier and will allow us to see where the current debate has its roots. The ideal of autonomy was originally developed as a political concept to describe the self-governing or self-determining status of the Ancient Greek city-states.[5] However during the Enlightenment there was a shift in thinking so that autonomy instead came to be understood as a capacity relating and belonging to human beings.

One particular way in which this individualising trend developed can be found growing out of political theory and particularly through the works of social contract theorists such as Locke and Rousseau. It is in their work that we can begin to find the origins of the concept of an individualized autonomy with the idea that people possess an 'original sovereignty' over themselves. This idea in turn comes from the belief common to social contract thinkers, such as Locke and Rousseau, that human beings, when existing in a state of nature, are free and equal as individuals. As free and equal individuals they also therefore inhabit a position where no one else has authority over them i.e. they occupy a position of original sovereignty.

It is possible, according to writers such as Locke and Rousseau, to become legitimately subject to another's authority only through an act of consent or agreement. In other words it is possible to surrender one's original sovereignty only by entering society and this is done by means of the social contract. However, in spite of this commonality to their thought Locke and Rousseau's arguments, when

[5]Reath Andrews, 'Autonomy: ethical' in *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/L007> [accessed 2 December 2007]

fully developed, take very different forms.

According to Locke, human beings in the state of nature are bound only by the laws of nature. Taking this as his starting point, Locke then begins by asserting our right to self-preservation in this state of nature and continues to develop his argument by suggesting that such a right can be logically extended, on the basis of all men being equal and independent, so as to incorporate the principle that, 'no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions.'[6]

Having established this principle it then follows, Locke argues, that before the establishment of government 'everyone has a right to punish the transgressors of that law to such a degree, as may hinder its violation.'[7] According to Locke it is the ownership of these rights that form the basis of all political authority. However, he then goes on to argue that there comes a point when all rational individuals will consent to the transfer of this authority (original sovereignty) to a central power, i.e. the state, for the limited purpose of preserving and protecting life, liberty and property. Therefore, it is Locke's belief, that the political authority of the state or government is ultimately derived from the individual's 'original sovereignty.'

Using such ideas of self-government as a starting point Rousseau then took and developed them to produce his own version of social contract theory. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau identifies sovereignty as residing in the collective body of a society's citizenry. Legislation can only be understood as legitimate if it comes from the citizens themselves, or rather, as he argues, 'the people that are subject to the laws ought to be their author.'[8] Furthermore, our freedom and independence as citizens can only, according to Rousseau, be ensured by our submission to the

[6] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), Second Treatise, Chp.2 Sec.6, p. 271
[7] Locke, Second Treatise, Chp.2 Sec.7, p. 271
[8] Jean Jaques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. M. Cranston (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1968), p. 83

'general will.' The 'general will' is, in turn, expressed through laws that protect and ensure our freedom and equality and can be enacted only through a fully participatory democracy. Therefore, according to Rousseau, 'man acquires with civil society, moral freedom, which alone makes man the master of himself; for to be governed by appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom.'[9]

This remark, as shall become clear, was to prove hugely influential for a number of autonomy theorists who followed after Rousseau. Not least amongst these thinkers was Kant for whom Rousseau's arguments played a significant role in the development of his own theories regarding autonomy and most specifically moral autonomy. Though Rousseau, in particular, was to play an influential role on the development of Kant's thought his was not the only influence. Around the same time as Locke and Rousseau were writing on social contract theory another trend of philosophical thought was developing that provided a slightly different approach to autonomy but one that was also to prove crucial to the concept's development away from being a purely political one.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many rationalist philosophers began to argue that our moral capabilities as human beings create and support our capacity to be self-determining. Human beings possess the capacity for reason and rational thought and it is this capacity, the argument runs, that enables us, as individuals, to discover moral truths for ourselves. That is to say we can discover these truths in a way that is quite independent from any guidance, influence, or coercion even, that may be given by such institutions as the Church or the state. This idea, that reason can or should occupy such an authoritative role within ourselves is the argument that

[9] Rousseau, p. 65

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underpins the further suggestion that our actions when guided by moral knowledge are self-determined. It is the coming together of these rationalist arguments with the more political arguments of Rousseau as outlined above that can be seen as the driving force behind the development of Kant's theories of moral autonomy.

Though the influence of these trends in philosophical thought on the concept of autonomy cannot be denied it remains the case that it is Kant's arguments for the autonomy of the rational agent that have been central to its expansion away from a purely political ideal and that have been the most influential on the development of this debate. It is true, and I shall come on to the reasons for this shortly, that Kant is concerned only with moral autonomy and therefore it is not possible to read a theory of personal autonomy straight off from his work. However, I think it is also fair to claim that without Kant's work in this area that the terms of the modern debate on personal autonomy would be unrecognisable. It is for these reasons that I feel it is necessary to examine Kant's arguments in some depth.

1. Kantian Autonomy

Before beginning to look solely at Kant's arguments I think it is important to clarify one issue in particular. Recently some writers have been at pains to separate out our ideas of autonomy and freedom. So it is, for example, that Dworkin feels it necessary to argue that the idea of freedom is concerned with particular acts while the concept of autonomy is a far more global notion concerned with the states of persons.[10] Kant, however, argues that, 'autonomy in its practical sense is nothing other than freedom achieved and sustained.'[11] For this reason then I do not feel it possible to discuss the development of Kant's arguments about moral autonomy without also considering his analysis of the concept of freedom. Kant develops these arguments in several of

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[10]Dworkin, pp. 13-15 & pp. 19-20
[11]Paul Guyer, *Kant* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2006), p. 179

his works such as *The Critique of Practical Reason* and *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* but I shall be focusing in particular on the analysis given in his work the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.*[12]

In the years just prior to the publication of the *Groundwork* Kant gave a series of lectures and during one of these he argued:

> Freedom is on the one hand that capacity which gives all other capacities infinite usefulness, it is the highest degree of life, it is that property which is a necessary condition that underlies all perfections. All animals have the capacity to use their powers in accordance with their choice, but this choice is not free, but is rather necessitated through incentives and stimuli, in their actions there is *bruta necessitas*; if all beings had a power of choice so bound to sensory drives, the world would have no value; however, the inner value of the world, the *summum bonum*, is freedom in accordance with a power of choice that is not necessitated to act. Freedom is thus the inner value of the world. On the other hand, however, insofar as it is not restricted under a certain rule of its conditioned use, it is the most terrible thing there can be…If freedom is not restricted by means of objective rules, then the greatest wild disorder results, for it is uncertain whether humans would not use their powers to destroy themselves, others, and all of nature…What is this condition, under which freedom is [to be] restricted? This is the law. The universal law is thus: Conduct yourself so that in all actions regularity prevails…Freedom can be consistent with itself only under certain conditions, otherwise it collides with itself.[13]

This is a long quote but one worth giving in full because it manages, according to Paul Guyer, to demonstrate two claims about freedom that are central to Kant's theorising. First, it shows that for Kant, freedom has a fundamental value. The second argument, Guyer maintains, is one where Kant suggests that freedom's full value can only be realised if each individual exercises it in such a way so that

    i)   it is consistent with their own future freedom

    ii)   it is also consistent with the freedom and future freedom of everyone else

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[12] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, introduction C. Korsgaard(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. and ed. M. Gregor, introduction A. Reath (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. P. Guyer, trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000)
[13] Immanuel Kant, *Vorlesung zur Moralphilosophie*, ed. Werner Stark, (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 2004) pp. 176-7,178,180, trans. by Paul Guyer and quoted in Paul Guyer, *Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), pp. 12-13

who may be affected by their choices.[14]

This argument, which is crucially important to Kant's theory, is fully reliant on his second formulation of the categorical imperative:

> So act that you use humanity, whether in your own
> person or in the person of any other, always at the same
> time as an end, never merely as a means.[15]

What this imperative, that we make humanity our end and never merely a means, entails is that each of us can set and pursue our own particular ends but we must do so in such a way that preserves and promotes our ability, and the ability of others, to do so on a continuing basis.[16]

As Guyer suggests, this argument sounds a lot like a definition of freedom. On the one hand our capacity to set our own ends is our freedom of choice while on the other our capacity to pursue these ends effectively requires us to have freedom of action.[17] Therefore, on any given occasion that we make a free choice, we must do so, according to Kant, in a way that preserves and promotes our ability to do so again on any other future occasions.

Furthermore, the second formulation of the categorical imperative requires us not only to be concerned with our own humanity but also with everybody else's humanity too. So it is that the use of our own freedom on any given occasion must not only be consistent with any future use of our own freedom but it must also be consistent with the preservation and promotion of the freedom of others too.[18] For example therefore it would be inconsistent with Kant's claim here if I were to use my freedom of expression, or right to free speech, to call and argue for the abolition

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[14] Paul Guyer, *Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), p. 13
[15] Kant, *Groundwork,*. 4: 429
[16] Guyer, 2006, p. 187
[17] Guyer, 2006, p. 187
[18] Guyer, 2006, p. 188

of that right or freedom as belonging to other people.

So, according to this argument we achieve freedom when we act in an orderly and reasoned way by taking on board these considerations. The flip side to this argument is, of course, that we will not be free if we act in an unruly, haphazard or even lawless manner. Kant is able to make this argument because at the heart of his theory is the idea that it is only through our capacity, as human beings, to reason that freedom or autonomy can be achieved. This argument, in turn, rests on realizing that it is only through reason that we can come to understand those rules that we need to follow in order to fully realise our freedom as autonomous beings.[19] Or, as Kant argues, this is the recognition of that 'property that a will has of being a law to itself.'[20]

It is in the third section of the Groundwork that Kant develops his arguments about freedom and autonomy in the greatest detail. He begins this section by giving a definition of freedom and he does this by arguing that, 'will is a kind of causality of living beings insofar as they are rational, and freedom would be that property of such causality that it can be efficient independently of alien causes determining it'.[21]

In other words what Kant is arguing here is that human beings are not bound by the causal laws of the deterministic physical world. This is a more complex argument to grasp than it at first seems because Kant also argues that while human beings are not bound by these causal laws they remain simultaneously very much part of the deterministic physical world. Kant believes and accepts that nature is a mechanical system governed by deterministic laws and therefore there are causal relationships that determine the behaviour of plants, animals and inanimate objects. Kant also

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[19]Guyer, 2006, p. 178
[20]Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:447
[21] Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:446

believes and accepts that humans too are part of this natural, phenomenal world and that our desires, emotions and inclinations also form part of this deterministic universe because they are a function of our nature.[22] However, as I have already stated Kant does not believe that as human beings that we are only of this deterministic, phenomenal realm and this has a profound impact on his arguments.

If we were to base our decisions only on those desires and emotions that form part of our determined existence it would only be possible, Kant argues, to generate hypothetical imperatives with which to guide our moral choices and actions. Therefore he argues:

> If the will seeks the law that is to determine it *anywhere else* than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal laws - consequently if, in going beyond itself, it seeks this law in a property of any of its objects - heteronomy always results. The will in that case does not give itself the law; instead the object, by means of its relation to the will, gives the law to it. This relation, whether it rests upon inclination or upon representations of reason, lets only hypothetical imperatives become possible: I ought to do something *because I will something else*.[23]

Kant describes these as hypothetical imperatives because, if we were to use them as the guiding principles for our moral actions, they could only describe choices we could or should make in order to attain a particular end.So, for example, a hypothetical imperative that could be used as an incentive for smokers to quit their habit might be, 'If you want to stay healthy you should stop smoking.' This is a hypothetical imperative because the motivation behind this claim is a desire to stay healthy and this desire is, in turn, an inclination. The condition being set on this inclination is that the individual needs to stop smoking. According to Kant then, such hypothetical imperatives can, therefore, carry no moral weight whatsoever. Categorical imperatives, on the other hand, are capable of telling us what we should

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[22]Dwight Furrow, *Ethics, Key Concepts in Philosophy* (London, Continuum, 2005), p. 20

[23]Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:441, Kant's own italics

do regardless of any such reference to particular ends. They contain no such conditions and are obeyed purely for their own sake. However, this is clearly only a negative account of freedom and according to Kant, such a conception does not, indeed cannot, tell us anything about freedom's nature or essence. What is needed instead he argues is a 'richer and more fruitful' positive concept.[24]

In order to develop such a positive account of freedom Kant begins by suggesting that being freed from the laws of nature, (remember that he has already argued that human beings are not bound by the causal laws of the deterministic realm), does not in turn mean that we can act in a lawless fashion and still consider ourselves truly free. Recognising such limitations on our freedom relies on us also recognising that existing independently from alien or external causes entails an independence from contingent and variable events. There is no freedom, for Kant, in leading a life that is embroiled and entangled in contingency.

As this argument develops it becomes clear that in order to understand Kant's arguments it is crucial to acknowledge his belief that human beings are free to act as 'first causes.' That we can understand ourselves in such a manner is based solely on the standards and principles that are generated by our capacity for reason.[25] It is through establishing this condition that Kant is able to argue that the world of freedom and morality has its own law: the law of rational self-determination or autonomy. In other words the only way for the will to be free or autonomous is for it to be governed by a law that it gives itself rather than allowing itself to act on whatever mere inclination happens to be alluring at any given moment.[26] The question that immediately presents itself though is how is this possible when, as we

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[24]Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:446
[25] Kant, *Groundwork*, introduction C. Korsgaard, p. xxix
[26]Guyer, 2006, p. 218

saw earlier, we remain as human beings firmly rooted in the deterministic universe?

To answer this question Kant argues we need to understand ourselves as belonging to both the world of sense (the phenomenal world) and the world of understanding (the noumenal realm). It is in the phenomenal world that our actions are to be understood as being governed by the causal laws of nature. However while our actions in the noumenal world cannot be governed by deterministic laws of causality we still cannot consider our actions there to be lawless. Therefore, our actions and choices in the noumenal realm must be governed, Kant suggests, by a different sort of causality and that, of course, is a causality that is in accord with the laws of reason.[27]

So far so good but it must be acknowledged that the idea of us possessing such noumenal choices is a remarkably difficult one to explain and that is in large part, it could be argued, because they remain ultimately inexplicable. Inexplicable because at the noumenal level, according to Kant, we can make free choices but they cannot be explained in terms of antecedent conditions. There is no 'cause and effect' as we understand it in terms of the laws of nature. So there can be no explanation on these terms because the very idea of justification through the use of antecedent conditions is itself a temporal notion that does not apply to the noumenal realm. Furthermore, it would seem, according to Guyer, that Kant was more than willing to just accept this inexplicability as the price of genuine freedom 'because although we can prove *that* we must conceive of the phenomenal world in causal terms we really cannot explain *why* we are so constituted as to have to experience objects in this way.'[28] Indeed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant goes so far as to argue that just accepting the

[27] Reath Andrews, 'Autonomy: ethical' in *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/L007> [accessed 2 December 2007]
[28] Guyer, 2006, p. 218

inexplicable nature of noumenal freedom puts us in no worse a position than the

acceptance of phenomenal determinism arguing that:

> How such a faculty…is possible is not so necessary to answer since with causality in accordance with natural laws we likewise have to be satisfied with the *a priori* cognition that such a thing must be presupposed, even though we do not in any way comprehend how it is possible for one existence to be posited through another existence.[29]

So, to summarise, Kant's position is that we have to posit noumenal or

transcendental freedom but due to its essentially inexplicable nature we can never

fully explain why we have chosen to exercise this freedom in any given way. This is

because causal explanation, as we understand it, can only take place at the

phenomenal level. These ideas, which Kant began to develop in the *Groundwork,*

remained central to his treatment of the freedom of the will.

Ultimately then this positive conception of freedom as autonomy develops Kant's

theory in such a way so that he can argue that the rationally free will is one that acts

only on general maxims that can at the same time be laws for all other free wills and

allows him to contend that a 'free will and a will under the moral law are one and the

same.'[30] Therefore, for Kant, the autonomy of the rational agent is identified as

conforming to the categorical imperative because this is the principle that best

captures the objective rational principle on which we should base all our moral

choices and actions.

It would be hard, to overestimate the influence and importance of Kant's conception

of autonomy on the development of Western philosophical political and ethical

theory. However, acknowledging Kant's influence is not to suggest that there are no

problems with his work; there are, some of which lead to a number of serious

criticisms. First, it is often argued that ideas of freedom and autonomy cannot be

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[29] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. P. Guyer and A. Wood (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), A448/ B476
[30] Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:447

adequately conceptualised without referring in some manner to our desires and goals; we value freedom and autonomy because we care about whether we are free enough to fulfil our goals, we have a personal investment in seeing them fulfilled. In Kant's defence it can reasonably be argued against this assertion that the demand of his moral theory is not that we should abnegate *all* our desires. Rather, such an argument continues, Kant is suggesting that we should only pursue the satisfaction of those desires, emotions and inclinations that are consistent with the maximal intra and interpersonal exercise of freedom.[31]

As I noted earlier most contemporary accounts of autonomy are concerned with far broader arguments that encompass personal autonomy than Kant's far narrower conception that is concerned solely with our moral autonomy. I believe though that it is possible to acknowledge these limits but still see the legacy of his arguments in contemporary philosophical theories. For example, many modern personal autonomy theories use the ideal of a self-actualising and self-directed agent which is an approach that clearly owes its existence to Kant's idea of self-determination. There also remains a clear and strong focus on the individual's right to make their own decisions and control their own lives free from any coercive influence. Also, and as shall become clearer, Kant's conception and understanding of what it is to be a rational autonomous agent is one that has had an enormous influence on contemporary philosophy.

So, again, while acknowledging Kant's influence I do not wish to suggest that Kant's ideas and ideals are universally accepted without hesitation. This is simply not the case and in some areas his thought is regarded as highly controversial and is strongly contested. One such area where ideals of Kantian autonomy are strongly debated is

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[31]Guyer, 2006, p. 17

feminist philosophy and some of the concerns raised in there shall become the focus

of my concern in later chapters and particularly my next chapter.

2. Hierarchical / Procedural Accounts of Autonomy

As I have already argued while Kant's influence remains central and can never be

entirely discounted, contemporary accounts of autonomy have moved away from

being concerned simply with our moral status to focusing on a more personal

conception of autonomy. Interest in such accounts of autonomy began in the 1970s

with the publication of a group of articles by Harry Frankfurt, Gerald Dworkin and

Wright Neely.[32] All three of these writers propose an understanding of autonomy

that has come to be described as hierarchical. In this next section my focus will be on

those classically hierarchical arguments developed by Harry Frankfurt and Gerald

Dworkin. I will then move on to discuss the work of John Christman who provides a

more contemporary understanding of such hierarchical approaches to autonomy.

Having spent the previous section considering an account of moral autonomy it will

be worthwhile briefly considering what is meant by personal autonomy. The concept

of personal autonomy, according to Christman, can be understood as encompassing

two broad sets of conditions. First, he suggests, there are competency conditions

which include, amongst others, our capacities for rational thought and self control.

Different accounts of autonomy offer very different sets of competencies that we

must supposedly acquire before we can be considered autonomous. The role and

importance of such autonomy competencies will come to play a crucial role in my

own arguments, especially those I develop in Chapter Five.

Second, Christman argues, there are authenticity conditions which stipulate that an

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[32]James Stacey Taylor, 'Introduction', in *Personal Autonomy: New Essays on Personal Autonomy and Its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, ed. by James Stacey Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 4

autonomous person must have the capacity to endorse or in some sense identify, or lay claim to, these desires, beliefs and values as their own.[33] Therefore the argument continues, if those beliefs and desires that form the basis of an individual's actions are sincere (or authentic) and have been decided upon after sufficient deliberation and are also free from excessive external influence or manipulation then that individual is to be understood as autonomous.[34] This is a big argument and Christman is claiming a lot, particularly in this last sentence. Also some of these arguments are fairly contentious and so will take some time to pick apart and reassemble. For now though it may help to consider the following example.

There are not many people who have not at some time in their lives attended a birthday party of one sort or another. The sort of party I want to consider is one where there is a chocolate birthday cake. So, if I was at one of these birthday parties and was offered a slice of chocolate birthday cake, as often happens, I may well really want to eat it. If, on reflection, I am happy to eat the slice of cake because I like chocolate cake and think I would enjoy doing so then I eat the cake autonomously. Imagine though that I do not want to eat the cake, perhaps I do not like chocolate. I am not allergic to chocolate or any of the cake's other ingredients, it is just that I do not like chocolate very much and so I try to refuse the cake. On doing do I am told that this cake was made by the host's mother who will be highly offended if I turn the offer of cake down. I then end up eating a slice of the chocolate cake because of the pressure that other people are placing on me. In doing so I act in a way that having reflected on my desires and beliefs I would not have chosen and this therefore, according to the conditions laid out above, would not be an autonomous action.

[33] John Christman, 'Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/autonomy-moral/> [accessed 11 June 2009]
[34] Furrow, p. 25

For Frankfurt and Dworkin this identification with, and reflection upon, our desires is to be analysed and understood in terms of a hierarchy. Frankfurt argues that not all of our desires should be considered as carrying equal importance. Rather, he suggests, we have desires that occur in practical situations that directly motivate us to act. These, Frankfurt argues, are our first order desires. So returning to the children's party, an example of this would be, seeing the chocolate birthday cake and thinking that I would really like to eat some. However, it is clear that we cannot just act on our first order desires all the time and in fact Frankfurt terms individuals who do just this 'wanton.'[35] Therefore, Frankfurt argues, we also have what are called second order desires. We use these second order desires to evaluate our first order desires and decide whether or not we do, or do not, want to act upon them. Returning to our birthday party after having already eaten one slice of birthday cake I am offered another. Now, it may be that I have a really strong desire to eat this second slice of cake, I really would like to, but I have also made a promise to myself to try and eat a more healthy diet and eating copious amounts of chocolate cake is therefore prohibited. So upon reflection, I refuse the offer of a second slice of cake because my desire to eat (lots of) chocolate cake is not endorsed by my higher order belief that I need to eat more healthily. To formulate this in rather more technical language it might be argued that a person is autonomous in respect to their first order desires, according to Frankfurt, if they volitionally endorse that desire with a second order desire or volition.[36]

The account of autonomy developed by Dworkin is virtually identical to Frankfurt's, especially when he argues that, 'autonomy is a second-order capacity to reflect critically upon one's first-order preferences and desires and the ability either to

[35] Harry G. Frankfurt 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person' , in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1998) p. 16
[36] Frankfurt, 1998, p. 20

identify with these or to change them in light of higher-order preferences and values.'[37]

According to James Taylor there are a number of strong advantages that can be identified by adopting such a hierarchical account of autonomy and indeed as I have argued above such an approach has been extremely influential upon the development of contemporary understandings of the concept. The first advantage Taylor identifies is that these accounts capture an important truth about agents in that individuals are understood as having the capacity to reflect on their desires and to endorse or repudiate them as they see fit. Furthermore Taylor suggests that the fact that both Dworkin's and Frankfurt's accounts of autonomy are substantively and procedurally independent of any normative content or any form of perfectionism is beneficial.[38] The need for such an approach is described by Dworkin when he argues that he can see:

> A number of reasons why autonomy is a relatively
> weak and contentless notion. First it must be so
> because people can give meaning to their lives in all
> kinds of ways, from stamp collecting to taking care of
> one's invalid parents. There is no particular way of
> giving shape am meaning to a life. Second, any feature
> that is going to be fundamental in moral thinking must
> be a feature that persons share. But any substantive
> conception is not likely to be shared.[39]

So Taylor suggests that such procedural and substantive independence for theories of autonomy and its tie into political liberalism is particularly advantageous especially in areas such as, 'applied ethics where respect for autonomy is of primary concern and where the focus on autonomy is driven by the recognition that some means must be found to adjudicate between competing claims in a pluralistic society.'[40] I am not wholly convinced by these arguments and will, in Section Five of the last chapter in

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[37]Dworkin, p. 108
[38] Taylor, pp. 1-2
[39] Dworkin, p. 31
[40]Taylor, p. 4

this Thesis, be arguing for a weakly substantive account of autonomy. However, there is a lot of work to do before I can substantiate that claim.

One argument that can be made immediately though is that while many writers see these aspects of Dworkin's and Frankfurt's theories of autonomy as beneficial there are just as many who would argue that autonomy so understood is open to a number of highly damaging theoretical criticisms. First, Christman draws attention to the way in which these theories highlight ambiguities in the concept of identification. Identifying with a desire can be understood as

i) acknowledging that desire but not passing judgement upon it

or

ii) as in some sense approving of it.[41]

This first sense of identification cannot be understood as a consistent marker of autonomy because people can and often do identify with many addictive or constrictive aspects of themselves e.g. smoking, gambling or alcoholism. Aspects such as these are usually understood as being markers of heteronomy and not as indicative of autonomy. Christman continues by arguing that the second sense of identification is no less problematic either. This is because there may be many genuinely authentic aspects of myself which I may not approve of which then forces the question, 'I may not be perfect but does that mean that I am thereby not autonomous?'[42] Of course not, that would, I think, be a quite ridiculous position to find oneself in; I do not approve of my tendency to procrastinate but after writing this Thesis I cannot deny that it is an aspect of my personality! This, very recognisable aspect of human life, is a problem for these theories of autonomy

[41] John Christman, 'Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/autonomy-moral/> [accessed 11 June 2009]
[42] John Christman, 'Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/autonomy-moral/> [accessed 11 June 2009]

because as Berofsky argues, 'insofar as endorsement remains essential, the doctrine [of identification] will be unable to accommodate the case of one who cannot endorse what is nevertheless a bona fide truth about himself.'[43]

A further problem for hierarchical theories such as these is that both Dworkin's and Frankfurt's approaches seem to be threatened by the problem of Infinite Regress-cum-Incompleteness. As I have outlined, we are autonomous, according to Frankfurt and Dworkin, if our first order desires are endorsed by our second order desires. My eating of chocolate cake is autonomous so long as I have reflected upon and then endorsed the desire to do so. The question that arises then is how and why are these second order desires autonomous? Two potential problems arise from this query.

First, if it is only possible for us to answer this question by looking for a further higher –order desire and so end up with a situation whereby our second-order desires need to be endorsed by tertiary (and beyond) desires then the problem of infinite regress beckons. Second, if we are autonomous for a reason other than the endorsement by higher order desires then the hierarchical approach to analysing autonomy is incomplete because we have not explained how an action comes to be fully autonomous.[44]

These criticisms, according to Taylor, also tie in to a Problem of Authority or an *Ab Initio* Problem. This query asks how it comes to be that an individual's second-order desires possess any authority over their lower order desires. As Gary Watson puts it, 'since second order desires are themselves simply desires, to add [to]them…is just to increase the number of contenders; it is not to give a special place to any of those in

[43]Bernard Berofsky. *Liberation from the Self: A Theory of Personal Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1995). p 101
[44]Taylor, p. 6

contention.[45]

Finally, Taylor argues that this understanding of the concept of autonomy is also open to the Problem of Manipulation. This is particularly true, he suggests, for Frankfurt's theory which is essentially ahistorical i.e. a person is autonomous with respect to their effective first order desires irrespective of their historical origins just so long as he volitionally endorses them.[46] Therefore, Taylor continues, it would be possible, according to Frankfurt's theory, for a 'nefarious neurosurgeon' or a 'horrid hypnotist' to inculcate into an individual both a first order desire and the required second order volition concerning this desire and for this individual to still be considered autonomous.[47] Obviously this argument looks deeply suspicious and we would be highly unlikely to accept such an individual as being an autonomous agent.

This last criticism is a stumbling block for Frankfurt's formulation of autonomy in particular but does not, at first glance, pose the same problem for Dworkin's account. It would appear that Dworkin is able to dodge this particular Problem of Manipulation because of his insistence on argument that the process through which a person comes to hold any autonomous desires or preference must be purely procedural. Therefore any desires inculcated by a hypnotist or neurosurgeon, according to Dworkin's position, would simply not count as autonomous.[48] It is clear then that Dworkin is only able to avoid this charge because of his assertion that autonomous desires are only attained in a procedurally independent manner. Therefore, as Taylor points out, this criticism is avoided only because Dworkin is simply ruling *ex cathedra* that a person is not autonomous with respect to any desire that they have been manipulated or coerced into holding and this is not enough to

[45]Gary Watson, "Free Agency," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 72 No.8 (1975), 205-220, (p. 218)
[46] Taylor, p. 5
[47]Taylor, p. 5
[48] Taylor, p. 5

make his arguments theoretically satisfactory:

> because an acceptable analysis of autonomy should not merely list the
> ways in which it is intuitively plausible that a person will suffer from a
> lack of autonomy with respect to her effective first order desires, but
> must also provide an account of why a person's autonomy would thus be
> undermined, so that influences on a person's behaviour that do not seem
> to undermine her autonomy (e.g. advice) can be differentiated from those
> that do (e.g. deception).[49]

In later works both Frankfurt and Dworkin were sensitive to and accepted criticisms

such as these of their original arguments and made a number of alterations to their

conceptions of autonomy in order to address these problems. Dworkin did so by

arguing that he was not concerned with the local conception of what conditions

needed to be present in order for an individual to be autonomous with respect to their

desires but rather that he was interested in a more global conception of autonomy as

a 'second order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first order

preferences, desires, wishes and so forth.'[50] In adopting such an approach Dworkin

may well be able to avoid the problems of regress and authority but as Taylor

suggests he does this at the expense of addressing the question that most theorists see

as central to debates concerning autonomy: how the exercise of this psychological

capacity for reflection results in persons being considered autonomous with respect

to their desires and actions.[51]

In his article 'The Faintest Passion' Frankfurt came to argue that the reason his

original conception of autonomy was susceptible to the criticisms outlined earlier

was because it rested on the idea that a person became autonomous with respect to

their desires by endorsing them with a 'deliberate psychic element'.[52] In order to

avoid these problems Frankfurt developed a satisfaction based analysis of

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[49]Taylor, p. 6
[50]Dworkin, p. 20
[51]Taylor, p. 8
[52]Harry G. Frankfurt 'The Faintest Passion', in *Necessity, Volition and Love*, ed. by Harry Frankfurt (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 104

identification. According to this conception a person is autonomous if they accept their desires as their own, or rather, as indicating something about themselves.[53] It is this acceptance of the desire that constitutes the individual's endorsement of it and so there is no need, according to Frankfurt, for any further endorsement of such an attitude of endorsement as this would lead us back to where we began. Rather, he argues, a person will identify with their first order desire if they are satisfied with their higher order attitude of endorsement (acceptance) that they have taken towards it. Therefore, it would appear that Frankfurt was able to address the Problem of Regress-cum-Incompleteness that threatened his earlier work. Furthermore, adopting such an approach also answers the Problem of Authority as Frankfurt argues that an individual's higher order attitude of acceptance towards their lower order desires does not possess any normative authority over them because these attitudes are simply being used to assess whether the lower order desires are to be seen as descriptively theirs.

So far so good for both Frankfurt and Dworkin but unfortunately neither reworking of their original theories is able to deal satisfactorily with the Problem of Manipulation. The reason for this failure is because it remains the case, for both theorists, that it is still possible for an individual to be hypnotised, or coerced in some other manner, into possessing a first order desire in such a way that they believe that it originates in some way from within themselves.

This Problem of Manipulation that faces such mainstream conceptions of autonomy is of great interest to feminist philosophers working in this area though it must be noted that these writers are not overly concerned with outlandish characters such as nefarious neurosurgeons or horrid hypnotists. Indeed the positing of such characters

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[53]Taylor. p. 9

is dismissed in Owen *et al* as 'tinker toy examples constructed from the armchair.'[54] This is a sentiment that would be warmly welcomed by many feminist thinkers because while Owen is writing from a psychiatric perspective and is concerned therefore with the possible undue influence of family members and clinicians over people with reduced mental capacity many feminist theorists see their approach to the problem of manipulation as dealing with the equally tangible forces of oppressive socialisation. This is a problem that will remain central to my further discussions of both feminist criticisms and reconfigurations of the concept of autonomy throughout my Thesis.

3. Hierarchical Autonomy Revisited

It would be a mistake though to move straight from Frankfurt and Dworkin to such feminist criticisms without considering those more recent and contemporary accounts of autonomy that Taylor calls 'neo-hierarchical theories of autonomy'.[55] From the arguments considered in the previous section it would seem that both Dworkin's and Frankfurt's hierarchical accounts of autonomy, while remaining influential, cannot escape the Problem of Manipulation. That this is the case for Frankfurt is due to his insistence on maintaining an ahistorical approach to desire formation. At no point does he give an account of where or how our beliefs, desires, preferences are meant to originate and develop. Recognising the difficulties that this causes for Frankfurt's theory it is this aspect of autonomy in particular that John Christman addresses in his work.

In order to deal with the Problem of Manipulation that would appear to confound so many hierarchical theories of autonomy, Christman develops an explicitly historical

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[54]Gareth Owen, Fabian Freyenhagen, Genevra Richardson and Matthew Hotopf, 'Mental Capacity and Decisional Autonomy: An Interdisciplinary Challenge' *Inquiry*, Vol. 52 No. 1 (2009), 79-107, (pp. 101-2)

[55]Taylor, p. 2

account of autonomy. Historical in the sense that, unlike Frankfurt, he places importance and emphasis on the ways in which our desires or preferences originate and are formed. For Christman, therefore, agent P is autonomous in relation to any given desire or preference (D) at time t if and only if:

i)   P did not resist the development of D (prior to t) when attending to this process of development, or P would not have resisted that development had P attended to the process;

ii)   the lack of resistance to the development of D (prior to t) did not take place (or would not have) under the influence of factors that inhibit self reflection;

iii)   the self reflection involved in condition i) is (minimally) rational and involves no self deception

iv)   the agent is minimally rational with respect to D at t (where minimal rationality demands that an agent experience no manifest conflicts of desires or beliefs that significantly affect the agent's behaviour and that are not subsumed under some otherwise rational plan of action.)[56]

However, Taylor suggests damningly that Christman in fact fails to provide either necessary or sufficient conditions for anyone to be autonomous in respect to their desires or preferences. He makes this argument by outlining two examples.

First, Taylor suggests that Christman fails to describe those conditions necessary for autonomy and asks us to consider the case of a child C whose mother at time t decides that she wishes him to learn to play the piano and who hits him when he fails to practice. Over time and as an adult C comes to realise (at time t1) that he does indeed enjoy playing the piano and that all that practice as a child has meant that he is incredibly proficient at doing so. However C firmly rejects the means which his mother employed to bring him to this position. Therefore, according to Taylor, 'even though at t1 [C] rejects the process by which he was brought to this desire to play the piano, at t1 (and onward) he appears to be fully autonomous with respect to this

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[56] John Christman 'Defending Historical Autonomy: A Reply to Professor Mele,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 23 No. 2 (1993) 281-90, (p 288)

desire.'[57]

The second example Taylor uses is that of a man who enters an order of monks, the

Jesuits, who follow the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola in a very strict manner.

Following these teachings includes practising a doctrine of complete submission to

their abbot. These monks do so because they believe that to do otherwise would be to

leave themselves vulnerable and open to the temptations of the devil. According to

Taylor, the problem here for Christman's conception of autonomy is that at time 't'

this man autonomously chose to enter such an order of monks knowing that in doing

so he was submitting himself to a situation where his ability to be self-reflective

would be severely curtailed, if not eliminated. Therefore, Taylor continues, if at a

later date, at time 't1', this man, in line with his Order's teachings, only desires and

wants whatever it is that his abbot tells him to desire or want, he would appear to

have 'reduced himself to the status of an automaton' but would still be regarded as

autonomous under Christman's conditions because:

> he would not have resisted the development of the desires he
> had at t1 had he attended to their generative process, the
> reflection inhibiting factors that prevented him from
> reflecting on his desires were those that he autonomously
> chose and he was minimally rational and not self-deceived at
> t1 also.[58]

So, Taylor argues, this monk is, in fact, the very paradigm of heteronomy in that he

does not reflect upon and then, on the basis of this reflection, choose his own desires,

beliefs, values. Furthermore, Taylor continues, because this is the case, even if an

individual's possession of their desires meets Christman's conditions, this is not

sufficient for them to be autonomous in respect to them.[59] This means, according to

Taylor, that despite Christman's best efforts to address the Problem of Manipulation

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[57]Taylor, p. 11
[58] Taylor, p. 11
[59] Taylor, p. 11

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it would appear that it remains, within the terms of his thesis, a very live concern.

While I agree with Taylor that Christman has not sufficiently dealt with the Problem of Manipulation I am not wholly convinced by Taylor's argument's either. My concerns are that neither Christman nor Taylor are sensitive to the fact that autonomy can be held in degrees, so whether our Jesuit monk is truly 'the very paradigm' of heteronomy I think is open to question. Also, and as I indicated earlier, I am not convinced by those arguments, such as Taylor's and Christman's, that regard autonomy as purely procedural. These are arguments that I will return and reply to as this Thesis develops.

4. Conclusion

The main focus of this chapter has been to gain an understanding of the concept of autonomy in terms of both its historical development and some of its more recent expositions. In developing these arguments I also began to highlight some of the concerns, namely the Problem of Manipulation, that feminist philosophers have raised with such mainstream accounts of autonomy. These concerns and others will form the basis of the next chapter in which I consider a number of feminist critiques of autonomy in some depth.

Chapter 2: Feminist Critiques and Concerns

In the first chapter I discussed those theories of autonomy that have informed both historical and contemporary mainstream philosophical discussions of autonomy. I also began to outline some criticisms of these theories that have been developed by feminist writers. Over the course of this chapter I will examine in far greater detail those feminist arguments that have found such traditional approaches towards understanding and conceptualising autonomy problematic.

The connection between recent feminist theory and the concept of autonomy has, over the years, Marilyn Friedman argues, been a turbulent, love-hate relationship.[1] During the 1970's the ideal of autonomy was praised by feminists for its libratory potential. Such arguments worked from the principle that it was the historic oppression of women that had prevented them from acting as fully autonomous agents. The solution, it was argued, was for women to simply gain equality and then they too would be autonomous agents. This line of argument was developed by and most closely associated with liberal feminist thinkers and is often referred to as First Wave feminism. It was this school of thought and approach to feminist theory that faced strong criticism during the 1980's and early 1990's from a variety of sources in feminist thought. It was during this period that many feminist writers began to suggest that traditional concepts of autonomy, such as the one found in Kant's writings, were inherently masculinist and therefore fundamentally flawed.[2] It is arguments such as these that I will be discussing for the rest of this chapter.

In the introduction to their book 'Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self' Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar identify five main forms that feminist critiques of autonomy have usually taken.

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[1] Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 81
[2] Friedman, p. 81

These are, they argue, the symbolic, the metaphysical, the care, the post-modern and the diversity critiques.[3] I shall begin this chapter by outlining and discussing the metaphysical and symbolic critiques before moving on to consider in some depth the critique of autonomy that arises out of an ethics of care approach. The arguments that Mackenzie and Stoljar identify as belonging to the post-modern and the diversity critiques are difficult and complex and so I shall only be considering them briefly towards the end of this chapter before developing and examining them in much greater depth and detail in Chapter Three.

Before beginning this discussion it is worth noting that none of these approaches are completely discrete and that there are major areas of overlap between all of them. Indeed it is often the case when reading feminist philosophy that is critically engaged with the concept of autonomy to find that several of these positions have been adopted simultaneously. As this chapter progresses and as I consider each of these critiques I will highlight those areas that demonstrate these overlaps.

1. The Metaphysical Critique

I shall begin by examining those arguments that Mackenzie and Stoljar classify as the metaphysical critique of autonomy. This approach, they suggest, is one of the most well established in all the feminist literature on the concept of autonomy and takes as its central claim the assertion that autonomy, as understood in mainstream philosophical argumentation, is inextricably linked to an account of the agent as essentially atomistic and radically individualistic.[4] Furthermore, according to Mackenzie and Stoljar, there are four different understandings of such atomistic individualism that can be taken up when constructing this metaphysical critique. Individualism is, therefore, generally construed in one of the following ways:

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[3] Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, 'Autonomy Refigured', in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. C. Mackenzie and N. Stoljar (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 5
[4] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 7

i)   Agents are causally isolated from all other agents.

ii)   An agent's sense of self is independent of the relations in which they
     participate.

iii)   An agent's essential properties are all intrinsic and are not compromised
      by the social relations in which they stand.

iv)   Agents are all metaphysically separate individuals.[5]

Mackenzie and Stoljar refute the first approach by turning to the work of Annette
Baier and her idea of 'second persons'. Baier overturns the claim that agents are
causally isolated from each other by highlighting how the development of
individuals is causally dependent upon the social relations of which they are a part:

> Self-consciousness depends upon exercise of the cultural skills, in
> particular linguistic ones, acquired during our drawn out dependency on
> other persons. A person, perhaps, is best seen as one who was long
> enough dependent upon other persons to acquire the essential arts of
> personhood. Persons are essentially second persons.[6]

What Baier is talking about here is the development of persons, their personalities
and their capabilities, or in other words, the development of the individual. She does
this by showing how this process happens through relations of interdependence and
argues that ultimately 'persons are essentially successors, heirs to other persons who
formed and cared for them, and their personality is revealed ... in their relation to
others.'[7]

So, according to this approach, we are 'second persons' and cannot therefore be
understood as being causally isolated from each other because our very existence as
an individual, as a person, is the result of relationships of dependency. Individuality
therefore can be retained while individualism, in the first sense given by Mackenzie

[5] Mackenzie and Stoljar. p. 7
[6] Annette Baier, 'Cartesian Persons', in Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals (London, Methuen and Co. Ltd ,
1985) p. 84
[7] Baier, p. 85

and Stoljar, is rejected. There are, I think, problems with Baier's account, for example, she does not define what the 'essential arts' of personhood are or explain where disabled individuals who may never acquire such arts fit in to her account. Also, as Baier, explicitly states, her account relies on the individual's linguistic skills and again, I would question how individuals who have difficulties in this area would fit into her theory. Having said this I do, however, accept her argument in its broadest terms: we are not capable of becoming agents without being causally dependent on others.

Turning to the second and third conceptualisations of individualism given above, Mackenzie and Stoljar suggest that these are often run together in contemporary feminist theory. Such conceptions of individualism are found in those theories that support abstract individualism or the idea that 'logically, if not empirically, human beings could exist outside a social context'.[8] Such an account of atomistic individualism carries with it, according to writers such as Jennifer Nedelsky, a concomitant account of autonomy. Such an account Nedelsky argues posits a 'dichotomy between autonomy and the collectivity' because the attainment of autonomy relies on 'erecting a wall (of rights) between the individual and those around him... The most perfectly autonomous man is thus the most perfectly isolated.'[9]

Feminist critics of such an approach begin by demonstrating that agents are not, in fact, atomistic and isolated but that rather they are socially embedded and are constituted, at least in part, by the social relationships in which they stand. There are obvious and clear affinities in this argument with those communitarian criticisms of

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[8] Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, N.J., Rowman and Littlefield, 1988), p. 29
[9] Jennifer Nedelsky, 'Reconceiving Autonomy: Sources, Thoughts and Possibilities', Yale Journal of Law and Feminism, Vol.1 No.1(1989), 7-36 (p. 12)

liberal individualism found in the theories of writers such as Michael Sandel in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* and Charles Taylor, especially when the latter argues, 'self-understanding is not something we can sustain on our own,... our identity is always partly defined in conversation with others or through the common understanding which underlies the practices of our society.'[10] A similar argument is to be found in Alasdair MacIntyre's contention that 'individuals inherit a particular space within an interlocking set of social relationships.'[11] The fact that there are strong tensions and disagreements between feminist and communitarian theorists over the nature of these social practices and relations should not be ignored but there is enough common ground between their understandings of the individual, I believe, to accept Sean Sayers's summary:

> We are essentially social beings. All our distinctively human and moral characteristics are constituted socially and historically. Our desires and values, our ability to reason and choose, our very being and identity as human agents and moral selves, are formed only in and through our social relations and roles. There is such a thing as society, and it is prior to and constitutive of the individual.[12]

Therefore, this particular feminist approach often concludes that if attributing autonomy to agents presupposes a radically atomistic individualism then any attempt to articulate autonomy is futile because autonomy so understood ultimately rests on a mistaken account of agency.

The question for the moment, however, is whether the refutation of these atomistic understandings of the individual automatically also entails a rejection of the concept of autonomy. I do not think so and I agree with Mackenzie and Stoljar when they argue that rejecting radical, atomistic individualism does not necessarily mean abandoning the concept of autonomy per se. Instead, they suggest, that as our

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[10] Charles Taylor, 'Atomism', in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers Volume 2* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 209
[11] Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London, Duckworth 1985), pp. 232-233
[12] Sean Sayers, 'Identity and Community', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 30 no. 1 (1999), 147-60 (p. 147)

understanding of the individual changes, from an atomistic one to an approach that recognises the importance of social and dependent relations, so our conception of autonomy will have to alter too, from an individualistic account to an anti-individualistic account. [13]

Finally, before moving on to consider the symbolic critique of autonomy there is one last form of individualism, as identified by Mackenzie and Stoljar, that needs to be addressed and that was the claim that agents are all metaphysically separate individuals. It would seem that individualism is a concept that has, in certain corners of feminist and indeed communitarian theory, accrued a number of very negative associations to such an extent that some theorists seem to appear to want to reject it as concept altogether. However, as Mackenzie and Stoljar suggest, this fourth understanding of the individual is true even if we assume, in the strongest terms, that social relations are essential properties of agency.

Perhaps to illustrate this point further it would be helpful to consider what it would mean to argue that individuals are not metaphysically separate. In the science fiction franchise *Star Trek* and in particular the *Next Generation* and *Voyager* series the crews of the Federation star ships often encounter a fearsome enemy known as the Borg. The Borg are an alien species that travel through space 'assimilating' other species in the pursuit of biological and technical perfection. Once assimilated an individual becomes part of the Borg 'hive mind' or collective consciousness. Therefore, Borg drones while they are individually embodied are not psychically distinct but share the thoughts, aims and drives of the collective. They are not, in other words, metaphysically distinct individuals.

Clearly this is not a description of human beings. We are, as Friedman notes,

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[13] Mackenzie and Stoljar. p. 8

separately embodied beings, except in the case of pregnancy and conjoined twins and even in these cases we remain psychically distinct individuals.[14] Also, and returning to the *Star Trek* example briefly, once an individual has been assimilated into the Borg and become part of the 'hive mind' they lose their name and are given instead a designating number. This example can be contrasted to, and used as support for, Friedman's argument when she points to the fundamental importance of the giving of proper names in all human communities and societies and concludes:

> Human beings are thus separately embodied, nominally distinct, physical particulars who may be more or less uniquely designated in discourse. Proper naming together with pronominal reference enable already discursive human beings to talk separately to and about each new entrant into human community. Separately embodied human beings can thus be separated discursively.[15]

Finally, Mackenzie and Stoljar also point to the fact that the argument which suggests individual autonomy presupposes individualism is true in a trivial sense. On its own the use of the phrase 'individual autonomy' can only refer to an argument concerning agents that are separate entities with a capacity for autonomy. Thus, they argue, no theory of individual autonomy could pre-suppose anti-individualism in the fourth sense.[16] Having examined those feminist arguments that express metaphysical concerns with the concept of autonomy I will now turn to the symbolic critique.

2. The Symbolic Critique

The main focus of what Mackenzie and Stoljar identify as the symbolic critique are those philosophical theories identified by feminist writers as implicitly, or explicitly, using an abstracted or idealised version of autonomy which is typified in the use of the concept of 'autonomous man.'

A very clear and highly persuasive version of such a critique is given by Lorraine

[14] Friedman, p. 32
[15] Friedman, p. 32
[16] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 8

Code in both her article 'The Perversion of Autonomy and the Subjection of Women' and her book *What Can She Know?*. Code begins by arguing that it is a version of autonomy which has its roots in Kant and Enlightenment thought that continues to dominate the 'social imaginary' of affluent Western social and political spaces. Furthermore, she continues, this ideal while containing a strong and persistent aspirational and inspirational appeal also, paradoxically, underpins continuing patterns of oppression and subjection. Therefore, she concludes, such a concept of autonomy is essentially inimical to feminist thought.[17] According to Code, this situation has arisen because our understanding of autonomy has become hyperbolised and that over time the original Enlightenment concept of autonomy has become associated with a number of other theoretical assumptions.[18]

This accretion of related ideas around the concept of autonomy, Code argues, means that philosophical theory has often utilised a particular character ideal of the 'autonomous man.' Central to this ideal is the notion of self-sufficient independence. This ideal of autonomy, which functions both descriptively and prescriptively, ultimately results in the promotion of a particular conception of human nature in which we are understood as self-reliant, self-making, independent creatures.[19]

Not only is this ideal of human nature found in philosophical theory but, as already noted, Code argues that it continues to dominate our social imaginary. Friedman gives a wonderfully clear account of such an archetype and contends that:

> Popular culture has long lionised the self-made man...the rugged individualist, the loner, the "Marlboro man"...the he-man, the muscle-bound "superhero"...These male figures tend to be independent, self-reliant, aggressive, and over-powering. Often they defy established

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[17]Lorraine Code, 'The Perversion of Autonomy and the Subjection of Women' in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self*, ed. C. Mackenzie and N. Stoljar (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 181 & 183
[18] Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (London, Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 77
[19] Code, 2000, pp. 183-4

authorities and institutions to accomplish their goals. Usually they have no dependents or family responsibilities, but on the rare occasions when they do, those relationships either support their aggressive efforts or become merely additional obstacles to be overcome....What we have here is a cultural glorification of men (but seldom women).[20]

Marlboro Man may not be as instantly recognisable cultural icon as he once was but I would argue that the phenomenal success of television characters such as Jack Bauer from *24*, Gregory House from *House* and Gene Hunt from *Life on Mars*, all characters that 'tick' every box of Friedman's analysis, would seem to suggest that this is an ideal type that is not disappearing or becoming any less popular and is, in fact, displaying a remarkable resistance to feminist analysis and criticism.

However, Friedman then goes on to question the relevance of such cultural analysis to philosophical accounts of autonomy. She does so by considering how much influence mainstream academic philosophy has on such popular conceptions and understandings of rugged self-sufficiency and self determination. Not very much she concludes and so argues that it is not philosophical conceptions of autonomy that should be under scrutiny but rather the cultural glorification of such male stereotypes.[21]

I am not convinced; philosophy does not operate in a sphere totally disengaged from wider society even though it may often feel like it. It is true, as Friedman argues, that few philosophy texts become best sellers but philosophical ideas and ideals inform huge swathes not only of our arts but also our day to day lives whether we are explicitly aware of the influence or not. Philosophy does not take place in a void either and is, in turn, influenced by shifts in social, cultural and political thought too. The fact that I am writing a feminist thesis is, I would suggest, prima facie evidence of that fact. So, I feel it is perfectly legitimate for Code to suggest that, at least until

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[20] Friedman, p. 91
[21] Friedman, p. 92

very recently, mainstream philosophy has operated with an abstraction and an ideal

of autonomous man who:

> is – and should be – self-sufficient, independent, and self-reliant, a self-
> realising individual who directs his efforts towards maximising his
> personal gains. His independence is under constant threat from other
> (equally self-serving) individuals: hence he devises rules to protect
> himself from intrusion. Talk of rights, rational self-interest, expedience
> and efficiency permeates his moral, social and political discourse. In
> short, there has been a gradual alignment of autonomy with
> individualism.[22]

This quote while clearly identifying the target of the symbolic critique also, in the

last sentence, demonstrates the point I made earlier about how the feminist critiques

of autonomy under consideration in this chapter are not discrete and often contain a

considerable degree of overlap. It should also be noted, and as Code herself admits,

that the autonomous man of this quote is a character ideal because 'neither all men

nor all avowedly autonomous men exhibit all of his characteristics all of the time.'[23]

Given this, should we not just understand 'autonomous man' as an aspirational ideal,

something that is not fully attainable for either men or women? I would argue that

while this ideal type of autonomy may not be fully attainable by either sex that there

are some specifically feminist concerns that arise from this account and that need to

be addressed.

First, as suggested earlier, such a concept of autonomy has its roots in Kantian

thought and as Code suggests such an approach adopts Kant's motto 'sapere aude!'[24]

This exhortation 'to dare to know!' requires that individuals should cultivate 'their

own minds' and Kant clearly makes it the 'duty of all men to think for themselves'

in order to escape the shackles of heteronomy.[25] Code develops her analysis by

drawing heavily on Foucault's essay 'What is Enlightenment?' in which he explicitly

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[22]Code, 1991, pp. 77-8

[23] Code, 1991, p. 78

[24] Code, 2000, p. 183

[25]Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' in *Kant: Political Writings 2nd edition*, ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 55

considers these arguments of Kant's.[26] By drawing on Foucault's examination of

Kant Code is able to argue that this Kantian '*all*' is in fact extremely limited and

exclusionary.[27] It is not necessary however to be a Kant scholar and to have to delve

deep into dusty archives to find evidence of this restriction in Kant's work as in only

the second paragraph of *his* article 'What is Enlightenment?' he argues that 'the

largest part of mankind (including the entire fair sex) should consider the step

towards maturity not only as difficult but also as highly dangerous.'[28] The maturity

that Kant is referring to here and that he believes too dangerous a step to take for

women is the ability to think for one's self or in other words to be Enlightened, to be

autonomous.

Furthermore Code also draws attention to the way in which Foucault highlights

Kant's argument that 'the freedom in question is the...freedom to make *public use* of

one's reason in all matters.'[29] For Foucault this argument further confirms the

circumscribed nature of Kant's theory once it is recognised that the emancipation

from heteronomy that Kant is concerned with here is a situated freedom and

therefore takes place in hierarchical societies. Therefore these are societies that

strongly determine whose utterances are worthy of public acknowledgement and

whose are not.[30] Decades of feminist analysis has shown us why and how women

have historically and routinely been confined to the private sphere and denied a

public voice but as Code argues 'autonomy's defenders tend to read these exclusions

as inconsequential to a 'universal' release from thraldom.'[31] It is from argumentation

such as this that the claim that the concept of autonomy is inherently masculinist

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[26] Michel Foucault. 'What is Enlightenment?' in *The Foucault Reader*. ed. P. Rabinow. trans. C. Porter (New York. Pantheon Books, 1984)
[27] Code, 2000, p. 183
[28] Kant, 1991, p. 54
[29] Kant, 1991, p. 55
[30] Code, 2000, p. 183
[31] Code. 2000. p. 183

arises. Autonomy so understood, the argument runs, has never been meant for women, it describes a male reality and therefore it is not as simple as just extending the concept to include women as those First Wave feminists believed.

Following on immediately from her claim about autonomy's defenders Code proceeds to argue that this attitude then, 'nurtures a stark individualism fuelled by the silent assumption that autonomous man is free to sidestep the constraints of materiality and the power of social-political structures in his projects of radical self-making.'[32] So, according to Code, this dominant hyperbolic ideal of autonomy also includes a strong emphasis on the substantive independence of individuals. By understanding autonomy in this manner such mainstream and traditional theories of autonomy place themselves in diametric opposition to those accounts that emphasise relations of dependence and reliance on others and the values and goods that arise from such relationships e.g. trust, friendship, and loyalty. Therefore, Code argues, the picture that emerges from such an understanding of autonomy is of radically and fundamentally separate and oppositionally divided individuals that cannot allow for the existence of diverse, complex and concrete agents. That this is the case, Code argues, is because, 'in a society comprised of a random assembly of such discrete, separate individuals, interdependence is at best *manageable* if carefully regulated; at worst it is straightforwardly menacing.'[33]

Again whether these arguments that are so highly critical of the symbolic nature of autonomy mean that we should then abandon it is as a principle in its entirety is debateable and is a question that I am briefly postponing answering until the end of the chapter. Instead I now want to highlight and draw attention to Code's considerations of dependence and reliance on others because this again demonstrates

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[32] Code, 2000, p. 183
[33] Code, 1991, p. 80

how these feminist critiques of autonomy overlap as these are the key concerns of those arguments associated with an ethic of care.

3. The 'Ethic of Care' Critique

It is widely acknowledged that much of the impetus behind the development of an ethic of care came from the work of moral psychologist Carol Gilligan with the publication of her seminal book, *In a Different Voice*[34]. These arguments were also the impetus behind my choice of research for this thesis. I first encountered arguments for an ethic of care and the questions that it raises for the validity of the idea of autonomy while writing a short dissertation as an undergraduate. My focus at that time was not the concept of autonomy in particular but the questions raised by my reading about the nature of autonomy were ones that I did not forget. I shall, therefore, be considering the critique that arises out of such an approach in some detail.

Gilligan's research was developed largely as a response to the claims made by another developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg.[35] Kohlberg himself was in turn hugely influenced by the work of Jean Piaget[36]. Piaget argues that in their last stage of moral development (generally aged 10 to 11) children come to accept that rules governing human behaviour arise out of complex social interactions and are, in some sense, chosen by reasonable people trying to engage in productive interaction.[37] In terms already familiar from the discussion of Kant in my first chapter Piaget describes this development in childhood moral reasoning as a progression from heteronomy to autonomy.

[34] Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1982)
[35] Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1981)
[36] Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgement of the Child*, trans. M Gabain (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932; Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1977)
[37] Flanagan, Owen (1998), Moral development. In E. Craig (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge. Retrieved April 27, 2009, from http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/WO27

This Kantian approach of Piaget's is retained in Kohlberg's theorising. However, unlike Piaget, who posits only two stages of moral development, Kohlberg identifies six, which in turn he breaks down into three distinct levels:

i) *Pre-conventional Morality*
   1. egoism: right is what is rewarded and wrong is what is punished;
   2. instrumentalism: right is what serves one's needs and satisfies fair agreements;

ii) *Conventional Morality*
   3. conventionalism: right is what conforms to age, gender, occupational and social role conventions;
   4. social contract: right is conceived in terms of the conventions of the society as a whole, especially the legal conventions;

iii) *Post-Conventional Morality*
   5. consequentialism: right is what promotes the general welfare even if this might involve breaking the law, for example, laws that discriminate on the basis of race or gender;
   6. Kant's categorical imperative: right is acting in accordance with rules that you would be willing to recognise as universal laws.

It is only once an individual reaches this highest stage of moral development, Kohlberg argues, that they begin to respond to moral questions in 'words such as duty or morally right and use them in a way implying universality, ideals and impersonality.'[38] This sequence of development, according to Kohlberg, is universal and irreversible. Irreversible because once an individual reaches any given stage of moral development they will always see that stage as an improvement and as more adequate than any of the previous stages of moral understanding that they have occupied.

The basis for Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg was the fact that he used only male respondents and her main charge was that his stages of moral development reflect a particularly male orientation towards ethical considerations. Conducting her own

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[38] Kohlberg. p. 22

empirical research Gilligan reported that when using Kohlberg's scheme women generally scored at a lower stage of development than men. Therefore, according to Kohlberg's theory, women do not appear to develop fully as moral agents. Gilligan's response to these findings was to suggest that it is not the case that women's moral reasoning is in any way less complex and therefore inferior to men's but rather that it is done in a 'different voice.' This different voice she argued arose from women utilising an 'ethic of care' while Kohlberg's respondents reasoned from an 'ethic of justice' perspective. She summarised the differences between the two perspectives thus:

> In this conception, the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. This conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centres moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules.[39]

Some of these differences may be brought out in a more concrete manner by considering the example that both Kohlberg and Gilligan asked their respondents to consider in their research, the Heinz dilemma:

> In Europe a woman was near death from cancer. One drug might save her, a rare form of radium that a druggist in the same town had discovered. The druggist was charging $2000, ten times what the drug cost him to make. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow money, but he could only get together about what half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No." The husband got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. Should the husband have done that? Why?[40]

The argument runs that those who are adopting an ethic of care perspective will respond to this dilemma by asking further questions about the context of Heinz's actions. So, for example, and as Grace Clement outlines, these respondents would be

[39] Gilligan, p. 19
[40] Lawrence Kohlberg, 'Stage and Sequence: The Cognitive Developmental Approach to Socialization' in *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*, ed. D.A. Goslin (Chicago, Rand McNally, 1969), p. 379

more likely to want to know if Heinz had really exhausted all avenues open to him before stealing the drugs. Such respondents are also more likely to wonder if Heinz is likely to end up in prison for stealing the drugs just when his terminally ill wife is most dependent upon him. These respondents are also more likely to ask about Heinz's wife's opinion, does she want the treatment, and does she want to carry on living? However, those respondents who answer the dilemma from a justice perspective are likely to see these sorts of questions as detracting from the real moral issue which is the dilemma that this situation creates between a right to life and the right to property.[41]

What the differing answers to this dilemma demonstrate are the key differences between the ethics of care and of justice. While ethics of justice are based on abstract universalisms ethics of care are contextual and place a high degree of emphasis on the importance of human connectedness and the maintenance of relationships. This is in contrast to ethics of justice that focus on human separateness and that prioritise the concept of equality. In turn these differences lead to each ethic understanding and evaluating the concept of autonomy in radically different terms.

As Mackenzie and Stoljar argue 'traditional ideals of autonomy [according to care critiques] give normative primacy to independence, self sufficiency, and separation from others, at the expense of recognising the values of relations of dependency and interconnection.'[42] These arguments become a feminist issue once it is recognised that these ideas of dependency and interconnection have historically been central to women's lives. Furthermore, these ideas have traditionally been coded as feminine and as belonging to the private realm. Therefore, the argument proceeds, traditional

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[41] Grace Clement, *Care, Autonomy and Justice: Feminism and the Ethic of Care* (Westview Press, Boulder, CO., 1996), pp. 12-13
[42] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 8

conceptions of autonomy not only devalue women's experiences and the values arising from them but are also defined in opposition to femininity.[43]

Before moving on to consider any further implications of Gilligan's 'different voice' for the concept of autonomy it must be recognised that the arguments for an ethic of care are not unanimously accepted. The belief that these two approaches i.e. an ethic of justice and an ethic of care can be described as essentially male and female is not without its detractors and indeed it would appear that further empirical research conducted after the publication of Gilligan's work does not support the idea that there are sex specific modes of moral reasoning.[44]

One very strong worry is that in trying to identify those virtues traditionally coded as feminine, e.g. nurturing and caring, as being in some way essential to the way in which women develop and reason morally that this plays straight into the hands of conservative thinkers who would wish to confine women to their traditional roles within the private and domestic sphere. I feel that this is a valid concern especially once arguments concerning the impossibility of defining what it is 'essentially' to be a woman are taken into account.

However while bearing these arguments in mind it remains the case that Gilligan's arguments do succeed in highlighting the fact that those traditional modes of moral reasoning that are based solely on rational, universalisable principles are not the only ones available to us. Therefore, in so far as an ethic of care challenges the belief that those emotional and affective values conventionally associated with the private (female) realm are of no moral import, it remains, I believe, an important area of feminist enquiry.

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[43] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 9
[44] Mary Brabeck, 'Moral judgement: Theory and Research on Differences between Males and Females' in *An Ethic of Care*, ed. M.J. Larrabee, (London, Routledge, 1993), p. 48

While my original quote taken from Gilligan's *'A Different Voice'* summarises the differences between ethics of justice and care very neatly it is also clear that she is covering a great deal of ground very briefly. In order to explicate and understand these differences more clearly I am going to use the three main points of contention between these different ethical perspectives as identified by Will Kymlicka. These are, he suggests:

i) *moral capacities*: learning moral principles (justice) versus developing moral dispositions (care)

ii) *moral reasoning*: solving problems by seeking principles that have universal applicability (justice) versus seeking responses that are appropriate to the particular case (care)

iii) *moral concepts*: attending to rights and fairness (justice) versus attending to responsibilities and relationships (care). [45]

While all of these distinctions provoke lively and interesting debate I am not directly concerned here with the debates surrounding moral reasoning and how we are supposed to morally attend to any given situation. However, there are arguments provoked by these distinctions that are concerned with moral capacities and moral concepts that raise interesting questions for feminist arguments about autonomy.

As outlined above there is a distinction made between justice and care perspectives over the learning of moral principles versus the development of moral capacities. As Joan Tronto argues an ethic of care, 'involves a shift of the essential moral questions away from the question, what are the best principles? To the question, how will individuals best be equipped to act morally?'[46] So, for an ethicist of care, there are important questions to be raised about the ways in which individuals develop those dispositions that enable them to morally assess and resolve any given situation in a manner that is sensitive to the concrete needs of others.

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[45] Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction,* 2nd ed.(Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.400-1
[46] Joan Tronto, 'Beyond Gender Difference to a Theory of Care,' *Signs,* Vol 12. No.4, (1987), 644-63 (p. 657)

Writers from the justice perspective, however, counter such arguments by pointing to the fact that in order to be able to apply moral principles in the first place agents must be able to assess situations sensitively so that they can determine which principle is relevant. As Martha Nussbaum has suggested, people can only develop an effective sense of justice if they have already first learnt a broad range of moral capacities. Such moral capacities, she argues, include the ability to perceive, sympathetically and imaginatively, the requirements of any given situation.[47]

So, the argument from the justice perspective would appear to be that a sense of justice in some way grows out of a sense of care. Furthermore, this is a process that is often understood to happen within the family and is an approach that typified in John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*.[48] The problem with such an approach is that it more often than not fails to take in to account the dynamics and relations of family life which are not themselves always characterized by principles of justice so that Susan Moller Okin was able to write of Rawls that he:

> in line with a long tradition of political philosophers... regards the family as a school of morality, a primary socialiser of just citizens. At the same time, along with others in the tradition, he neglects the issue of the justice or injustice of the gendered family itself. The result is an internal tension within the theory, which can be resolved only by opening up the question of justice within the family.[49]

Unfortunately however, and as Kymlicka argues, it would appear to be the case that many theorists of justice, including Rawls, do not want to address this question of justice within the family and are simply 'content to assume that people have somehow developed the requisite capacities' for moral judgement.[50]

While these arguments are explicitly concerned with moral capacities it seems reasonable to suggest that they can easily be extended and just as readily applied to

[47] Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 304-6
[48] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice, revised edition* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999)
[49] Susan Moller Okin, 'Reason and Feeling in Thinking about Justice' in *Ethics* , Vol. 99 No. 2 (1989), 229-249 (p. 231)
[50] Kymlicka, p. 402

the concept of autonomy. So, to paraphrase Tronto, the important question to ask is 'how will individuals be best equipped to act autonomously?' What capacities do we need to be autonomous or is autonomy a single and discrete capacity in itself? If nothing else the debate between ethicists of care and justice as considered above shows that very often philosophical accounts just assume that the skills required by competent, able-bodied adult individuals, such as personal autonomy and the capacity for moral judgements, are just 'acquired' within the realm of the family. Frequently there is no further consideration or analysis given within these accounts as to who it is that is acquiring these skills or indeed how such skills are learnt and developed by individuals. These are, I believe, key questions and, as such, will be considered and answered over the course of the rest of this thesis.

Having considered those arguments arising out of an ethic of care that concern the development of moral capacities I will now look at the different understandings of moral concepts that are found between ethics of care and justice.

According to Kymlicka, one of the central differences identified by Gilligan between these two modes of moral reasoning is the idea that an ethic of care is concerned with accepting responsibility for others and as having, therefore, a positive concern for their well being while the justice perspective thinks only of others in terms of respecting their rights-claims.[51] Kymlicka then proceeds to argue that the problem for this aspect of Gilligan's argument is that she has a very limited understanding of rights, seeing them as nothing more than a self-protection mechanism that can be upheld and respected by adopting a simple policy of non-interference. Therefore, Kymlicka concludes, under the terms of Gilligan's theorizing rights are only to be

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[51] Kymlicka,p. 409

associated with selfish (liberal) individualism.[52]

However, as Kymlicka argues, such an understanding of rights only really belongs to libertarian theories such as those espoused by writers like Robert Nozick. Other liberal rights based theories, such as Rawls's, are, Kymlicka suggests, very concerned with imposing positive responsibilities towards others on all individuals.[53] Kymlicka then goes on to argue that once Gilligan's arguments are seen as only applying to one extreme form of rights based theory her distinction between care and justice reasoning as based on responsibilities and rights threatens to collapse unless it can be shown that there are differing forms of responsibility at work in these ideas.[54]

Central to liberal political theory is the idea that individuals must take responsibility for their own choices and tied into this belief is an emphasis on objective (un)fairness. However as the arguments considered above have shown ethics of care stress the particular and concrete. This emphasis, Kymlicka argues, turns the focus towards the idea of subjective hurts and the responsibility that the consideration of such hurts does or does not place on the individual. Sandra Harding summarises the situation thus, 'subjectively-felt hurt appears immoral to women whether or not it is fair,' while men, ' tend to evaluate as moral only objective unfairness – regardless of whether an act creates subjective hurt.'[55] Of course the immediate response from the

It is this distinction between *types* of responsibility rather than rights versus responsibility, according to Kymlicka, that ultimately creates problems for the concept of autonomy as generally understood.[56] Furthermore, and as discussed above, justice theorists place a great deal of importance on the fact that we should, as

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[52] Gilligan, pp. 22, 136 & 147
[53] Kymlicka, p. 409
[54] Kymlicka, p. 410
[55] Sandra Harding quoted in Kymlicka, p. 410
[56] Kymlicka, p. 410

individuals, take responsibility for our own interests. As Kymlicka argues:

> In the justice perspective, I can legitimately expect as a matter of
> fairness, that others attend to *some* of my interests, even if it limits the
> pursuit of their own good. But I cannot legitimately expect people to
> attend to *all* of my interests, for there are some interests which remain
> my own responsibility, and it would be wrong to expect others to forgo
> their good to attend to things which are my responsibility.[57]

So, in line with this argument, the justice perspective allows for the existence of the

N.H.S. because we understand it as fair that we should, through our taxes, pay for the

healthcare of everybody. I will pay for your cancer treatment even though I may

never suffer from cancer myself. However, this approach also means that it would

not be considered fair for the state to pay for all my living expenses through taxation

just because I had decided that I did not want to work and would rather stay at home

pursuing my gardening hobby.

However, for some care theorists the adoption of such a justice approach allows us,

as individuals, to abdicate our moral responsibilities to others. It does this because it

permits us to limit our caring to only those situations in which there are claims of

objective unfairness and allows us to ignore instances where there are subjectively

felt hurts. Therefore, an ethicist of care can argue, that within a justice perspective

we are allowed to ignore avoidable suffering such as that of Heinz's wife in

Kohlberg's and Gilligan's original example. Of course the immediate response from

the justice position is to argue that it is such a focus on subjective hurts that in fact

represents an abdication of responsibility because 'it denies that the imprudent

should pay for the costs of their choices and thereby rewards those who are

irresponsible and penalises those who are conscientious.'[58]

A further problem for moral theories of care, Kymlicka notes, is that approaches

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[57]Kymlicka, p. 411
[58]Kymlicka, p. 412

such as these, that base themselves on accounts of subjective hurts, not only place too little emphasis on individual responsibility but paradoxically they place too much responsibility on other people. This is because there are no checks and balances in these theories to limit our moral obligations because 'there is always something more that we can do for others, if we attend closely enough to their desires - there is always some frustrated desire that we can help fulfil'.[59] Therefore, he concludes, moral claims based solely on subjective hurts threaten not only objective fairness but also ultimately our autonomy because, as Jonathan Dancy argues, a moral agent who is faced with constant moral claims on her time and energy will have no opportunity to freely pursue her own desires and attachments.[60] Understood in this manner it would appear that such ethics of care are, in fact, highly damaging to women's autonomy.

Also, and as Kymlicka acknowledges, this is not a new criticism to be faced by ethicists of care and furthermore, he argues, no care theorist worth her feminist salt would wish to be seen as perpetuating the sexist stereotype of the eternally self-sacrificing woman who is always prepared to put everyone else's needs before her own.[61] Similarly no care ethicist would deny that all moral theories have to be able to distinguish between actual needs and those needs that are merely perceived. While it would be unfair to argue that care thinking fails to acknowledge this distinction, between actual and perceived needs, as Alison Jaggar notes, no full explanation of how this difference is to be understood has been given. Rather, she argues, accounts of care ethics would seem to preclude raising this question by presenting care as a 'success' concept. What Jaggar means here is that within ethic of care theories the caring perception of another's need in any relationship is, by its definition, veridical.

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[59]Kymlicka, p. 413
[60]Jonathan Dancy ' Caring about Justice' in *Philosophy*, Vol. 67, no. 262 (1992), 447-66 (p. 451)
[61] Kymlicka, p. 413

Or, in other words, if the carer does not perceive and assess the cared-for person's needs correctly then they are not engaging in care reasoning.[62] So, as Joan Tronto suggests, through genuine attentiveness the caretaker can come to see through any possible pseudo needs of the cared-for individual and therefore come to appreciate what the other person really needs.[63] The dangers for such a self-authenticating approach to slide into paternalism are, according to Jaggar, all too clear:

> Overindulgence or 'spoiling' are only the least of the moral mistakes that
> may be carried out in the name of care. Other [...] abuses include incest
> or even foot binding. Incestuous fathers often portray themselves as
> caring for their daughters [...] and the Chinese women who bound the
> feet of their daughters and granddaughters also equated the pain they
> caused with care.[64]

In an attempt to address concerns such as these many care theorists, like Margaret Urban Walker, argue that all caring intentions must be validated through communication with the cared for individual.[65] While this approach would allow the caring relationship to be understood as involving reciprocity or mutuality the question that immediately springs to my mind, and it is one that is born from my own experience of caring for my autistic child, how is this communication supposed to happen with individuals whose very vulnerability and continuing dependency arises from that fact that they suffer from communication disorders? I think therefore that this question over the verification of needs and wants of the cared-for individual remains a stumbling block for ethicists of care.

Returning now though to the question of autonomy the issue for Kymlicka remains: how much autonomy can we claim for ourselves, and how much reciprocity can we

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[62] Alison Jaggar, 'Caring as a Feminist Practice of Moral Reason' in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, ed. V. Held (Oxford, Westview Press, 1995), p. 189
[63] Joan Tronto, 'Women and Caring: What Can Feminists learn about Morality from Caring?' in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. A. Jaggar and S. Bordo (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1989)
[64] Jaggar, 1995, p. 192
[65] Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Concerns* (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2003)

demand from others, without irresponsibly neglecting their subjective hurts?[66] In line

with the rest of care reasoning theorists such as Leslie Wilson have argued that the

only way to answer such a question is to do so contextually or, 'on the grounds of

what is reasonable to expect from the individual being cared for, along with what

should be expected from such an individual given the nature of the caring

relationship at hand.'[67]

The concern that many writers have with this approach is that it is not just that we

need limits to our moral responsibility but in order to be autonomous we need these

limits to be predictable. This is because, according to Kymlicka, if we want to be

able to be genuinely committed to our projects then we must be insulated to some

extent from the contingent desires of those around us and the abstract rules of justice

reasoning do offer some such protection.[68]

This argument is all well and good until it is noted, as many feminist writers have

done, that the sort of reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship that has just been

outlined is one that can only really be enjoined and enjoyed by competent, able-

bodied adults and totally ignores any relationships or individuals that do not fit such

a description e.g. the parent child relationship. It would seem then that many justice

theorists have either explicitly, but more often implicitly, followed Hobbes' advice

when he wrote that we should, 'consider men as if but now sprung up out of the

earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of

engagement to each other.'[69]

The reason for this absence of consideration in nearly all mainstream philosophical

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[66]Kymlicka, p. 414

[67]Leslie Wilson, 'Is a "Feminine" Ethic enough?' in *Atlantis*, Vol.13, No.2, (1988) 15-23 (p. 20)

[68]Kymlicka, p. 415

[69] Thomas Hobbes, *The Citizen: Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society* (Indianapolis, Id., Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), p. 205

texts about the raising of children and the caring for dependents has largely been the result of the strong public-private distinction that has characterised so much Western philosophical thought. The family belongs to the private realm and therefore its practices are of no concern to theories of justice which have traditionally been seen as belonging to the public sphere. It is on these grounds that Rawls was able to argue that interactions between able-bodied adults are the 'fundamental case' of justice and that subjective hurts as the basis for any moral claims should be rejected because 'to argue this seems to presuppose that citizens' preferences are beyond their control as propensities or cravings which simply happen.'[70]

While these arguments may well be the case when considering relations between competent adults in the public sphere it does not continue to be so once we start to look beyond this restricted realm, not least because, 'all of us inevitably spend our lives evolving from an initial to a final stage of dependence. If we are fortunate enough to achieve power and relative independence along the way it is a transient and passing glory.'[71]

It can be seen then that such justice theories only describe what is, in actuality, only one part of our lives. Though a lot of the feminist criticisms of theories of justice have concentrated on the raising and nurturing of children Margaret Walker has also demonstrated how there is an ill fit between the 'norms of autonomous, self-reliant and self-interested agency' and the situation of vulnerable, dependent elderly individuals and furthermore, with those who are responsible for their care. First, she argues that the moral position of dependently frail, both physically and mentally, elderly people is just not adequately considered in terms of the kinds of independence ,self-control or reflective self direction that are generally associated

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[70]John Rawls 'Social Unity and Primary Goods' ,1982, quoted in Kymlicka, p. 418
[71]Willard Gaylin quoted by Kymlicka, p. 418

with autonomy. Second, she argues that the ideals of consensual obligation and

contractual responsibility for autonomous agents also do not describe the reality of

the situations that the caregivers of these dependants find themselves in. As Walker

contends:

> Often demands for care fall…upon those, disproportionately female, who
> see no reasonable and humane alternative to providing it, even at the cost
> of severe economic disadvantage and practical and emotional strain.
> These are areas where ideals of autonomous agency do not meet the
> concrete realities of aging.[72]

So it would seem that once we begin to include the care of dependent others into our

moral and political reasoning that problems begin to develop for the concept of

autonomy. Justice reasoning not only presupposes that we are autonomous,

competent, able bodied adults but it also supposes, on top of these requirements, that

we are not the care givers for dependants.[73] Obviously this is an ideal that just does

not describe the lives of most people and so according to Annette Baier the care

perspective 'makes autonomy not even an ideal…A certain sort of freedom is an

ideal, namely freedom of thought and expression, but to "live one's life in one's own

way" is not likely to be among the aims of persons.'[74]

So the questions we are left with at the end of this discussion are is the concept of

autonomy ultimately flawed as some care ethicists would have us believe? Can the

concept of autonomy only ever describe those individuals who operate in the public

realm or is there a way in which we can retain the idea of autonomy without losing

sight of all our moral responsibilities to care for those who are dependent on us? I

think the answer to the second question has to be yes, there is a way of reconfiguring

autonomy to accommodate dependent relationships, but I need to do some more

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[72]Walker, p. 191
[73]Kymlicka, p. 419
[74]Annette Baier, 'Hume, The Woman's Moral Theorist?' in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. E.F. Kittay and D. Meyers (Savage, Md., Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), p. 46

theoretical leg work before I am in a position to spell out how.

4. The Postmodernist and Diversity Critiques

The fourth critique that Mackenzie and Stoljar consider is one that they term the

postmodernist critique, a term that they acknowledge they are using very loosely and

as a catchall to group together a diverse number of theories and approaches.[75] This

critique includes those feminist approaches that take as their starting point

psychoanalytic theory, Foucauldian theories of power and agency and feminist

theorising on sexual difference and otherness.

Central to all of these perspectives is the critique of the subject which many feminist

writers use as a means of attacking the assumptions they believe to be implicit in the

concept of autonomy. So, according to Mackenzie and Stoljar, the critique of the

subject as provided by psychoanalytic theory draws a picture of 'agents as conflict

ridden, often self-deluded, fundamentally opaque to themselves and driven by

archaic desires of which they may not even be aware let alone be able to master.'[76]

This is in direct contrast to the 'complete self transparency, seamless psychic unity

and self mastery supposedly required by autonomy.'[77] Autonomy therefore,

according to this approach, like the self that it rests upon, is an unobtainable

Enlightenment conceit.

Feminist arguments that draw on Foucauldian analysis follow him in dismissing the

concept of autonomy because it relies on a Kantian ideal of free will. Rather, they

argue, the reality is, or at least reality as understood by Foucault, is that there is no

pure, self-determining free will that can escape the operations of power. Therefore,

the argument continues, there is no 'true' self waiting to be discovered underneath

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[75] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 10
[76] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 10
[77] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 10

the machinations of power that can said to be autonomous.[78]

Finally, feminist theories of difference suggest that there is nothing essential to being a woman, no defining universal characteristic or attribute. Following this logic the concept of autonomy is therefore to be understood as a socially, historically, culturally specific ideal and even more specifically, an Enlightenment, white, male, Western middle-class liberal ideal, that has come to be understood as a desirable universal norm.

The final feminist critique of autonomy outlined by Mackenzie and Stoljar is the diversity critique which they acknowledge is a parallel debate to the one described as postmodernist.[79] This critique is directly concerned with the question of whether agents need to be cohesive and unified which has an obvious bearing on questions of autonomy. Feminist theorists working in this field, such as Diana Meyers and María Lugones, suggest that in fact our identities are intersectional in that they combine group affiliations, for example, race, gender, sexual orientation, age and disability, that are unique to individual women and, therefore, there is no unitary sense of self. So, as with the postmodernist arguments already considered, if theories of autonomy are dependent upon a transcendental self, a 'real' self, a 'core' self, then the idea of self offered by diversity theorists is incompatible with the concept of autonomy as generally understood.

5. Conclusion

I am aware that I have dealt with these last two critiques in a very brief manner. It is not that I am not aware of the complexities of these debates and nor is it that I feel that they do not deserve greater explanation. My reasons for doing so are as follows.

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[78] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 10
[79] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 11

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter the relationship between feminist theory and the concept of autonomy has been a rocky one to say the least. The critiques I have discussed above, including the care critique, have all been used by various writers to suggest that the concept of autonomy is so fundamentally flawed that it should just be abandoned. Indeed, as I have already noted in Chapter One, Sarah Hoagland has gone as far as suggesting that, 'autonomy ...is a thoroughly noxious concept [that] encourages us to believe that connecting and engaging with others limits us ... and undermines our sense of self.'[80]

However, as Mackenzie and Stoljar suggest, the notion of autonomy remains essential to feminist attempts to understand oppression, subjugation and agency and moreover, they believe, 'none of the major feminist critiques justifies repudiating the concept altogether.'[81] Rather, they argue that what is needed is a re-conceptualisation and re-configuration of the concept of autonomy that takes into account these feminist criticisms. What is needed, Mackenzie and Stoljar argue, is a concept of 'relational autonomy'.[82] So far this is an argument that has convinced me.

However Mackenzie and Stoljar then proceed to suggest that relational autonomy, 'does not refer to a single unified conception of autonomy but is rather an umbrella term, designating a range of related perspectives.'[83] I find this to be a rather weak approach and while accepting that feminist philosophy needs a conception of relational autonomy I will be working towards a more positive re-configuration rather than simply an umbrella, catchall thesis. This concern notwithstanding I think it is worth considering why Mackenzie and Stoljar believe the critiques considered so far do not mean a wholesale rejection of autonomy.

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[80] Sara Lucia Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Towards New Value* (Paolo Alto, Cal., Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988), pp. 144-45
[81] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 3
[82] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 4
[83] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 4

The target of the symbolic critique, as given by Code, is the cultural character ideal of the autonomous man that has come to dominate Western societies. So, such symbolic arguments do not provide us with any reason not to try and develop a new understanding of the concept of autonomy and, hopefully, one that takes into account these criticisms because as Code herself argues, 'relationships without autonomy can be claustrophobic and exploitative.'[84]

Moving on to consider the arguments developed in the metaphysical account, again, Mackenzie and Stoljar suggest, that it is not the idea of autonomy per se that is the problem but rather what is needed is for the distinction between the concept of individual or personal autonomy and individualistic conceptions of individual autonomy to be kept clear.[85] Again, the care critique does not have to entail an outright rejection of the conception of autonomy but rather it forces us to acknowledge relations of (inter)dependency within any account that we give.

Finally, Mackenzie and Stoljar suggest that the arguments developed by the postmodernist and diversity critiques are 'salutary, for they alert us to the need to develop notions of autonomy based on richer, more psychically complex, and more diverse conceptions of agents.'[86] I agree wholeheartedly and feel that if I am to develop a full account of autonomy I need first to understand who it is that is being autonomous. What sort of self am I talking about? These questions concerning the nature of the self, subjectivity and agency have been fundamental to feminist theory and unless fully addressed and answered I do not think it is possible to give a satisfactory account of autonomy. Therefore, my next chapter will examine those feminist arguments which support the critique of the subject.

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[84] Code, 1991, p. 73
[85] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 8
[86] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 11

Chapter 3: Post-Structuralist Subjects and Feminist Agents

A large section of feminist thought has traditionally operated on the idea that all

women share 'something', that in some way it is possible to describe or to give an

account of whatever 'it' is that is universal, or essential, to being a woman. For some

theorists this has meant a providing an account of women's common nature while for

other thinkers women are bound together by their experiences or indeed by a shared

developmental trajectory. Moya Lloyd styles these collective aspects as 'moments'

and identifies them in feminist theory as taking ontological, narrative or

psychological forms.[1] This belief that there are identifiable 'moments' that are

capable of providing a shared and common starting point has been the basis for

most feminist politics including liberal, radical and Marxist traditions. However, this

belief in the shared unity of women has a long history of being questioned and

criticised:

> 'That man over there he says that women need to be helped into
> carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere.
> Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me
> any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I
> have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could
> head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as
> a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a
> woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most of them sold off to
> slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus
> herd me! And ain't I a woman?'[2]

I cannot think of a quote that more eloquently speaks to the fact that women are not,

and should not be understood as, a homogenous category than these famous words

from Sojourner Truth, a freed slave speaking at a women's convention in 1851.

What Truth's refrain of 'and ain't I a woman?' clearly demonstrates is that it has

never been an easy task for feminist thought to address or accommodate all the wide

and varied aspects of all women's lives. Indeed trying to accommodate such

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[1] Moya Lloyd, *Beyond Identity Politics: Feminism, Power and Politics* (London, Sage Publications, 2005), p. 13
[2] Sojourner Truth, quoted in Lloyd, p. 35

difference has been the source of intense and often heated debate for most of feminism's history.

Complicating these disagreements is the fact that the use of the word 'difference' by feminist writers has not been uniform. First, it has been used to describe the differences between men and women. Second, it has been used by some writers to refer to the differences and the diversity found between women and in this form has been central to arguments concerning identity politics. Finally, *différance* is a term used by poststructuralist writers to describe the 'inherent instability of categories' including that of woman.[3] It is these last two uses with their differing criticisms of essentialism that I shall now consider.

In very broad terms 'identity politics' describes a form of political understanding that is based on all the individuals of a group sharing certain characteristics, so for example, age, race, disability or gender. So, as Lloyd puts it, identity politics operates on an 'identarian' logic where unity, or sameness, is sought beneath difference.[4] She goes on to argue that identity politics are also therefore essentialist in that they work on the assumption that not only are the characteristics that unite the group intrinsic but they also transcend history, culture and geography. The problem for this sort of approach becomes immediately apparent as soon as we remember Sojourner Truth's words. Identity politics can all too readily encourage uniformity and conformity and begin to work as a normative ideal as to who can and cannot count as 'woman'.

The second form of essentialism that the idea of difference has been used to criticise is the idea of the unified, coherent, capable subject that underpins, and is seen as

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[3] Lloyd, pp. 35-6
[4] Lloyd, p. 36

necessary by some feminists to, the category of woman. It is the critique of this idea

of the stable unified subject that Lloyd's third use of difference is associated with

and is an approach that has had a fundamental impact on all feminist thought

whether welcome or not.

1. Freud, de Saussure and the Critique of the Subject

As with my discussion of autonomy in Chapter One I think that in trying to

understand the 'critique of the subject' that it useful to try and develop a sense of the

history of this approach and so this is where I will begin.

With the development of modern thought during the seventeenth century there was

also a concomitant change in our understanding of what it meant to be human.

Instead of the pre-modern understanding of human existence in terms of an image of

an extended self, the individual during this period came to be seen as a subject or

rather as a 'sphere of subjectivity containing its own experiences, opinions, feelings

and desires, where this sphere of inner life is only contingently related to anything

outside itself.'[5] Central to this conception of the self as subject is the idea that the

self is a simple and unified phenomenon. This understanding has been so influential

that until relatively recently it was widely accepted with very little challenge to its

fundamental status at the heart of modern thought. However over the past fifty years

or so this conception of the self as a unified subject has come under a sustained

attack from a loose bundle of theories that are generally described as being

'postmodern'. A key idea in such postmodernist thought is the idea of 'de-centring'

the subject so that humans are no longer conceived of as having a unified, cohesive

self but rather they are understood as being 'polycentric, fluid and contextual

[5] Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London, Routledge, 2004), p. 108

subjectivities.'[6]

In his article, "Decentred Autonomy: The Subject After the Fall" Axel Honneth
identifies two intellectual traditions as being responsible for the critique of the
subject which he describes as a 'far reaching crisis in the classical conception of the
human subject.'[7] The first of these traditions, he argues, is the psychological critique
that begins fully with the development of Freud's thought though it should be noted
that earlier echoes are to be found in the works of the German Romantics and
Nietzsche. The second tradition that Honneth identifies arises from the language-
philosophical critique of the subject. I shall begin by looking at those theories
developed by Freud.

Prior to the work of Sigmund Freud, most theorists had understood the self in terms
of consciousness and such an understanding had also included conceptions of
rationality, free-will and self-reflection.[8] Also preceding Freud there had been
writers like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche who had argued that our rational minds are
dominated by an irrational and unconscious part but it was Freud who took the idea
of the unconscious and developed it into a far more complete and expansive theory.

According to Freud our day to day, routine actions are driven by motives and desires
more numerous and complex than our common sense understandings could possibly
recognise or, indeed, allow for. Therefore he claimed that most human behaviour is
to be explained in terms of these unconscious causes in the individual's mind and
that we can gain an understanding of these hidden motives and desires through
guided analysis and in particular the analysis of dreams, obsessive behaviours and

[6] Guignon, p. 109
[7] Axel Honneth, 'Decentered Autonomy: The Subject After The Fall', in *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. by Charles W. Wright (Albany, State University of New York, 1995), p. 261
[8] Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 245

slips of the tongue or pen.

So, to use a well known analogy, the mind, for Freud, was much like an iceberg, the bulk of which - the unconscious- is hidden beneath the water but nevertheless exerts a dynamic and controlling influence on the part visible above the water - our conscious mind. It follows from this theory that whenever an individual makes a choice they are being governed by mental processes of which they are unaware and over which they have no control. Consequently, and according to the terms of this theory, our ideas of free will or autonomy are to be understood as an illusion. However, according to Freud, it is possible to empower the self by bringing the unconscious into the conscious through the forms of analysis outlined above and it is in this way that repression and neuroses are to be minimised. This then is the first critique Honneth identifies; I will now look at those arguments that form part of what he terms the linguistic critique of the subject.

Honneth recognizes two further traditions of thought that then form this second critique of the subject. On the one hand, he argues, there is the body of work that derives from Wittgenstein while on the other there are those theories that take as their starting point the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and that have been labelled poststructural. This label covers works from writers such as Lacan, Althusser, Derrida and Foucault. As with so many theoretical groupings in philosophy there is as much that separates these theorists as joins them together. There are, however, a number of key theoretical understandings about language, subjectivity and meaning that all these writers share and so allow us to group them together as poststructuralists.

It is not possible to understand poststructural arguments about language and meaning

without first looking at the structural linguistics of Saussure. According to Saussure language has a pre-given and fixed structure that is not dependent on being realised either in speech or writing. Rather, he argues, it is an abstract system constituted by a chain of signs. In turn each sign is to be understood as comprising of a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the sound or image of the word while the signified is the meaning of the sign. Furthermore, according to Saussure, the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, in other words there is no natural connection between the sound image and the concept it identifies.[9] The meaning of each sign, Saussure argues, is derived from its difference to all other signs in the language chain e.g. *cap* rather than *cup* or *cop*.

The key move in Saussure's work for poststructuralist thinkers comes with his argument that language does not reflect an independent social reality but that in fact language is what constitutes social reality for us. The difference between the two approaches, structural and poststructural, is that Saussure believed that the meaning of signs is fixed or positive:

> A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with differences of ideas, but the pairing of a certain number of acoustical signs with as many cuts made from the mass of thought engenders a system of values, and this system serves as the effective link between the phonic and the psychological elements within each sign. Although both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately, their combination is a positive fact.[10]

Poststructural theory, while retaining Saussure's insight that meaning is produced by language rather than being reflected in it, thoroughly rejects his positive fixing of sign and meaning. Instead poststructural theorists such as Derrida argue that there is never any fixing of meaning within the sign but rather meaning is constantly deferred.

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[9] Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 1997), p. 23
[10] Ferdinand de Saussure, *A Course in General Linguistics*, revised ed., trans. W. Baskin, ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye(London, Fontana, 1974), p. 120

Meaning cannot be fixed because, according to poststructural theory, people and cultures produce new words and phrases, and on occasions change the meanings of words completely, all the time. In other words, language is not static, it is dynamic. For example, consider the changing use of the word gay which has historically gone from meaning happy and blithe to referring to homosexual men and has now amongst certain social groups, to the dismay of many, become synonymous with being stupid or useless.

So, for poststructuralist theory, because meaning is in a constant state of flux no language system can ever be understood as complete. Therefore, such theorists argue, there cannot, and never will, be a definitive set of signifiers. As Alison Stone argues, 'meaning ... is not fixed but is endlessly deferred until the time when the set of signifiers in the language is completed.'[11] The kick for poststructuralist theory is, of course, that such a time will never, can never, arrive.

As I indicated earlier another common theme to all poststructuralist theory is the way in which it approaches ideas of the subject and subjectivity. It is these ideas and their variously different manifestations in the writings of key theorists such as Lacan, Derrida and Foucault and the profound effect they have had on feminist thought that will be the focus of the rest of this chapter.

However, returning briefly to my earlier discussion of Freud, it is important to note that there are several possible readings of Freud's work that can and do result in very different implications for our understanding of the self and subjectivity. There is the Freud who is consistent with Enlightenment tradition and who is committed to science and rational mastery. It was this reading that was dominant during the first half of the twentieth century when the goal of most psychoanalytic theory was to

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[11]Alison Stone, *Introduction to Feminist Philosophy* (Cambridge, Polity Press,2007), p. 115

discover the deeper recesses of the 'real' self that lay hidden beneath the surface of normal experience. However, towards the middle and the end of the twentieth century this idea of a 'real' or authentic self came under increasing attack and following the work of structuralist and poststructuralist thought there is also the reading of Freud that presents him as far more deconstructivist and decentring. This coming together of the two critiques identified by Honneth, psychological and linguistic, is exemplified by the work of the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

2. The Subject of Lack

In constructing his account of the subject and subjectivity Lacan used those arguments that had already been established by Freud as his basis. However, Lacan took and developed these arguments in such a way so as to provide a new and linguistic based theory of (sexed and gendered) subjectivity. His work has been both angrily rejected and warmly embraced by feminist theorists with the latter case being most notably demonstrated by writers such as Irigary, Kristeva and Cixous.

According to Lacan, there are three key stages or orders in the development from child to adult, the *real*, the *imaginary* and the *symbolic*.[12] The *real* describes the state of being in very young infants, generally up to six months of age, who are unable to distinguish themselves from their mothers. Infants at this age have no sense of self or otherness and certainly no understanding of themselves as either male or female. Feelings of self and otherness do not start to develop, Lacan argues, until the child enters a phase of the *imaginary* order which he terms the mirror-stage. The *imaginary* order describes that aspect of human existence whereby we identify with images around us. As we shall see this order is largely superseded by our entry

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[12] Martin and Barresi, p. 257

into the *symbolic* but Lacan allows that the *imaginary* remains and persists in every individual to a greater or lesser degree throughout their lives.

The mirror stage, according to Lacan, occurs when the child is between six and eighteen months of age and first recognises its reflection, in a mirror, as its own. At first this recognition gratifies the infant because it gives the child a sense that it is in control not only of its movements but also of its environment.[13] Concomitant to this growing sense of self the mirror stage also signals the infant becoming increasingly aware of its difference to, and its separateness from, its mother.

Unfortunately for the infant, but in a step that is critical to Lacan's theory, this recognition of self is also a *mis*recognition. This is because the child looking in the mirror is identifying with an image that is ultimately different from it. The image has a unity and capacity for control that the infant does not possess, or in Lacanian terms, that it lacks.[14]

Furthermore, Lacan argues, the child is not entirely unaware of this misrecognition and does begin to become conscious of the fact that they are not synonymous with their mirror image and that, therefore, their sense of possessing a unified self is, in reality, a fantasy. However the child is not prepared to sacrifice this illusion and continues to cling to the idea, that they are a unified self, by demanding love from its mother. The child makes these demands in the vain hope that this will definitively demonstrate that they are as their mother views them: perfect and complete.[15]

It is not possible though for the child to remain in such an exclusive relationship with its mother and at some point it must enter the wider social realm. In order to do so, Lacan argues, the child needs to acquire language. Language therefore is the driving

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[13] Stone, p. 114
[14] Stone, p. 114
[15] Stone, p. 114

force in expelling the child from its previously exclusive, one to one relationship with its mother and so, according to Lacan, plays a role akin to that of the traditional father: the authority who imposes and enforces society's demands.

It is at this stage, with the acquirement of language, that the individual enters Lacan's final stage of development, the symbolic order. However it is not possible to go any further and fully understand Lacan's work without also understanding his arguments about the structure of language.

According to Lacan the realm of the *symbolic* is the realm of language. In developing his ideas about language Lacan drew strongly on the work of the structuralist theorist Saussure but, as he does with Freud, Lacan takes Saussure's ideas and develops them in line with my earlier account of poststructuralist theory. Therefore, according to Lacan, our encounters with language, with its promise of meaning, are deeply frustrating and unsatisfying because 'no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification.'[16] Our belief that it could be different rests again on a misrecognition, as Weedon argues:

> Just as the infant of the mirror phase misrecognises itself as unified and in physical control of itself, so the speaking subject in the symbolic order misrecognises itself and its utterances as one and assumes that it is the author of meaning.[17]

This misrecognition and frustration felt by the individual as a result of the continual deferment of meaning leads, according to Lacan, to the development of desire and in particular the desire for meaning within the individual. Desire then, for Lacan, is not a biological drive as it is for Freud but rather it develops in the individual as a result of acquiring language and their subsequent frustration at the lack of positive meaning.

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[16] Jaques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, W.W. Norton Company Inc., 1966/ 2002), p. 141,
[17] Weedon, p. 52

The acquiring of language therefore signals not only the entrance of the individual to the symbolic order but also entails the child's sense of having a complete and unified self being thrown into disarray. Ultimately, Lacan is arguing, if signifiers cannot be understood as having stable meaning then they cannot work to provide the individual with a coherent sense of self.

So for Lacan we are all condemned as individuals to infinitely pursue meaning and in so doing we also infinitely, though futilely, pursue the prospect of gaining a complete and coherent sense of self.[18] However, as discussed earlier, Lacan acknowledges that the symbolic order is not all encompassing and that we all, as individuals, continue to operate, to varying degrees, within the imaginary order with its fantasies of unified and coherent subjectivity.

If not difficult enough already Lacan's theories about the symbolic realm are complicated further once his arguments concerning the Phallus are taken into account. For Lacan the symbolic order is necessarily patriarchal because the Phallus is the transcendental primary signifier of all societies and cultures. These arguments are made even less clear by Lacan's ambiguous use of the term Phallus within his own works. On some occasions it is clear that he is referring to the Phallus as a symbolic concept while on others his arguments are more literal. However, whether metaphorical or not, it follows that the role of the Phallus for Lacan is central to the development of our sexed or gendered identity which, he argues, is determined by our relation to this primary signifier.

The Phallus, according to Lacan, is the primary signifier that governs the symbolic orders of all societies and cultures. Therefore, within any culture, to have control of the Phallus is to have control over the laws and the meanings of that society which is

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[18] Stone, p. 116

clearly a position of considerable power. Furthermore, Lacan argues, this position of

control is the position of the Other. At this point it is necessary to recall the

arguments I made earlier, when it was suggested that it is in the misrecognition by

the individual of themselves as Other, during the mirror-phase, that is the foundation

of our subjectivity.

Lacan then develops this argument to suggest therefore that women necessarily enter

the realm of the symbolic as subjects of lack. However they enter this realm not as

men do, as simple subjects of lack, but instead as subjects of a double lack because

they do not possess a penis. Indeed, Lacan suggests, the patriarchy of the symbolic

order allows men, because of their penis, to further misidentify themselves with the

position of the Other.

Therefore, within the terms of this scheme woman is radically other – she is utterly

unknowable in her own right and unthinkable in terms of the phallogocentrism of

Western culture except, that is, as the other of man.[19] Phallogocentric because

according to Lacan Western thought is both logocentric (dominated by the word) and

phallocentric (dominated by the phallus). It is this aspect of Lacan's theory that

allowed Cixous and Clement to write of woman that 'She does not exist, she cannot

be.'[20]

Clearly for many feminist writers arguments such as these are enough to reject

Lacanian analysis outright as they appear to deny woman's very existence, especially

when his arguments about women existing only in terms of 'double lack' are

considered. Furthermore, and as Lois McNay acknowledges, another problem with

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[19] Lloyd p.18
[20] Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, 'The Newly Born Woman' in *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, ed. Susan Sellers (London, Routledge, 1994), p.39

Lacan's analysis is that it is crucially ahistorical and formal in nature.[21] Therefore,

she suggests, it is hard to see how the Lacanian subject connects to the concrete

practices and achievements of woman as actual agents in the world:

> The socio-historical specificity of agency and of particular struggles is
> denied by being reduced to an effect of an ahistorical and self identical
> principle of non-adequation between psyche and society. Indeed agency
> is imparted to the –pre-reflexive realm of the unconscious, rather than
> being conceived of as the property of determinate historical praxis.[22]

This ahistorical nature of Lacan's account is, I believe, a major flaw in his

argumentation however, for writers such as Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray, Lacan's

ideas formed the starting point for a great deal of fruitful discussion about the nature

of femininity. While I acknowledge that these writers and their use of Lacanian

psychoanalysis have had a huge impact on the development of some areas of

feminist inquiry their discussions do not, I feel, move my arguments concerning the

subject and her autonomy forward and so it is not a discussion that I have the time or

space to examine within the limits of this thesis.

3. The Deferred Subject

Before moving on to consider an account that is crucially aware of and dependent on

the historical nature of the subject there is another critique that I want to consider

first. This is a critique of the subject that again rises out of post-structural analysis

and which can be termed the deferred subject.[23] Such an analysis owes much to the

thinking of Jacques Derrida but it should be noted that he was not in the first

instance a theorist of the self and so any critique of the subject and subjectivity

developed out of his writings is done tangentially.

According to Derrida, Western thought has historically been driven by a logic of

identity. In other words a logic that thinks everything into a unity, a whole, a totality.

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[21] Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000), p. 7
[22] McNay, p. 8
[23] Lloyd, p. 22

This totality, this wholeness, can also be understood as encompassing a unity of the thinking subject with the object so that there can be a grasping of the 'real'.

As part of the development of this logic, or as Derrida terms it a 'metaphysics of presence', a hierarchy of binary opposition is created. These dualities arise because the very act of defining an identity or a category means that something has to be excluded. So, as Weedon argues, men define themselves in relation to women: women *are* what men *are not* and so women become Other.[24] This is a similar argument to the one discussed above in relation to Lacan and is an example of the reason that these approaches are often brought together under the banner of poststructuralist thought despite their often significant differences in approach. Furthermore, this is an argument expanded by Iris Marion Young when she writes that 'any definition or category creates an inside/outside distinction and the logic of identity seeks to keep those borders firmly drawn.'[25]

As a result of this logic of identity Western metaphysics of presence, according to Derrida, has constructed a vast array of binary oppositions: subject/object, mind/body, culture/nature and of course male/female. I think it is clear that without having to look too hard these dualities can be found informing the whole structure of Western philosophy. However before going on to consider the implications of these arguments for the subject and subjectivity I think it will be worthwhile to spend some time trying to unpick what Derrida means by 'presence'. To do so will also involve looking at his use of the ideas of structure and the centre.

In *Writing and Difference* Derrida argues that it is only recently in the history of philosophy that an examination of the 'structurality of structures' has been

[24] Chris Weedon, *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), p. 104
[25] Iris Marion Young, 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference' in *Feminism/Postmodernism* ed. Linda J. Nicholson (London, Routledge, 1990), p. 303

conducted rather than there being a simple acceptance of ideas as absolute truths.

What I think Derrida means here by the 'structurality of structures' is that once we

accept that many of our concepts and ideas are contingent and historical structures

we can begin to question and explore how these structures are put together , or in

other words, their structurality. Furthermore, he argues, the idea of the centre has

been fundamental to our understanding of structure:

> The function of this centre was not only to orient, balance and organise
> the structure – one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganised structure –
> but above all to make sure that the organising principle of the structure
> would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. By orienting
> and organising the coherence of the system, the centre of a structure
> permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the
> notion of a structure lacking any centre represents the unthinkable
> itself.[26]

It is clear then from this analysis that if the centre is removed from the structure then

the whole edifice will collapse so, for example, if God, understood as the central and

organising principle of the idea of religion were to be removed then the whole

structure of religion would collapse.[27]

The centre then is that which gives us an illusion of fixity, stability, transparency and

meaning. This for Derrida is *presence* and so we have the:

> historical determination of the meaning of being in general as *presence*,
> with all the sub-determinations which depend on this general form and
> which organise within it their system and their historical sequence [...].
> Logocentrism would thus support the determination of the being of the
> entity as presence.[28]

According to Derrida if stability and fixity of meaning could be attained then

meaning would be fully present. However, the centre for Derrida is also the

'transcendental signified,' it is the hidden source of meaning that cannot be

represented in language and so remains forever beyond our grasp.

[26] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London, Routledge, 1978), p. 352
[27] Martin and Barresi, p. 263
[28] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 12

Therefore nothing is ever fully present and it is this lack of presence that results,

Derrida argues in 'play':

> If totalisation no longer has any meaning, it is not because the
> infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite
> discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is language and a
> finite language – excludes totalisation. This field is in effect that of *play*,
> that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that
> is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field... instead of
> being too large, there is something missing from it: a centre which arrests
> and grounds the play of substitutions...this movement of play [is]
> permitted by the lack of centre or origin.[29]

So for Derrida the stability of the structure, as discussed above, is dependent on the

centrality of meaning that is often expressed through those hierarchical binary

oppositions. However, once it is understood that these dualisms are not the

expressions of a pre-given natural order but are instead the result of specific

historical and social conditions then the structure that they belong to becomes open

to play. So, the practice of deconstruction consists in putting the elements of our

linguistic structures into play and in doing this we destabilise them and so remove

the illusion of presence.[30]

Deconstruction therefore, in order to allow us to play, does not use the logic of

identity but instead uses a logic of *différance*. As Martin and Barresi argue *différance*

means recognising that each appearance of a sign differs from all its other

appearances and that the meaning of all signs are constantly, or rather infinitely,

deferred.[31] A wonderfully clear example of this constant deferral of meaning and its

implications for our understanding of 'woman' is used by Diane Elam in her book

Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyme.

The phrase *mise en abyme* originates in heraldry and describes a pictorial

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[29] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 365
[30] Martin and Barresi, p. 263
[31] Martin and Baressi, p. 263

representation in which the relation between part and whole is inverted: the whole image is represented within a part of the image. A common place example of such a device is found on boxes of Quaker Oats where there is a picture of the Quaker Oats man holding a box of Quaker Oats which in turn has on it a picture of the Quaker Oats man holding a box of Quaker Oats and so on and so on. Therefore, as Elam argues the *mise en abyme* 'opens a spiral of infinite regression in representation'.[32] Elam expands this idea and recodes it as *ms. en abyme* and argues that adopting such an approach and such an understanding allows feminism to accept that:

> each new attempt to determine women does not put an end to feminist questioning but only makes us aware of the infinite possibilities of women.... women may be represented, but the attempt to represent them exhaustively only makes us aware of the failure of such attempts.[33]

As I noted at the beginning of this section Derrida was not primarily a theorist of the self but it is not hard to see having considered his arguments how a deferred account of the subject can be constructed. The metaphysics of presence would encourage us to think of ourselves as a centred, coherent unity but this of course, Derrida would argue, is illusory. Instead the suggestion is that we are decentred and open to play. However, as Lloyd argues, one criticism that can be levelled against such a deferred understanding of the subject is that it pays too little attention to how certain versions of subjectivity came to be centred and privileged in the first place. These are questions that are obviously at the heart of feminist analysis. Such a Derridean account fails to address these issues because its emphasis is placed only on the instability of meaning and does not address or consider, as Lloyd suggests, problems of super- and sub- ordination.[34] From such a Derridean perspective all subject positions appear to fail. Crucially such an account does not allow for the fact that some subject positions are more successful than others or give an account as to why

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[32] Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyme* (London, Routledge, 1994), p. 27
[33] Elam, p. 28
[34] Lloyd, p. 22

such positions have enjoyed such historical longevity. There is, in other words, no consideration of power.

4. The Constituted Self

Versions of the subject-in-process that do take account of such questions of power are accounts of the constituted self and the pre-eminent theorist to look at when considering such an account of the subject is Foucault who argued:

> It is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals. The individual, that is, is not the *vis a vis* of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects. The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle.[35]

There are a number of key conceptual ideas that are central to Foucault's theory that are at work in this quote, namely the concepts of discourse and power, which need further explanation.

The concept of discourse allows Foucault to account for the ways in which all knowledge is constituted. Knowledge, in this context, should be understood as encompassing and including all social practices, all forms of subjectivity and all power relations. Discourses however are not to be understood merely as ways of thinking and of producing meaning rather they should instead be understood as the means by which the nature of the body, the (un)conscious mind and the emotional life of the subject is constituted. Our body, our thoughts and our feelings, according to Foucault, have no meaning outside of their discursive articulation.[36] A demonstration of this argument is found in Foucault's analysis of the ways in which women's bodies were categorised and understood, or rather, discursively articulated, by the developing modern sciences in his book *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault

[35] Michel Foucault 'Two Lectures,' in *Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge – Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-7*, ed. Colin Gordon (London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980) p. 98
[36] Weedon, 1997, p.105

called this process *hysterization* and argued that its development meant that women

became understood only in terms of possessing a womb and concomitantly as

'nervous' or indeed 'hysterical':

> A threefold process whereby the feminine body was analysed – qualified
> and disqualified – as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby
> it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a
> pathology intrinsic to it; whereby, finally, it was placed in organic
> communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was
> supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial
> and functional element), and the life of the children (which it produced
> and had to guarantee by virtue of a biological-moral responsibility
> lasting through the entire period of the children's education): the Mother
> with her negative image of 'nervous woman', constituted the most
> visible form of this hysterization.[37]

What this example shows is how what could just be seen as a purely medical

understanding of women's bodies as possessing wombs instead became central to the

way in which all aspects of women's lives were experienced.

Furthermore, Foucault also argues within the same book that all discourses are

situated within a wider, interconnected web of power relations. Before expanding on

this it is worth noting that power within Foucault's thought is always a relation,

power is:

> the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they
> operate and which constitute their own organisation; as the process
> which through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms,
> strengthens or reverses them; as the support which these force relations
> find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary,
> the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another;
> and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general
> design or institutional crystallisation is embodied in the state apparatus,
> in the formulation of the law, in various social hegemonies.[38]

So it is possible to see from this quote that power, for Foucault, is a dynamic of

control or indeed a lack of control and compliance. It operates between discourses

and between the subjects of these discourses. Crucial to both of these concepts,

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[37] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1981), p. 104
[38] Foucault, 1981, p. 92

discourse and power, is the recognition that they are historically, socially and culturally specific. Therefore the subject, who, as has just been discussed, is an effect of power relations and discourse is also historically, socially and culturally specific. The target of Foucault's critique is clearly the transcendental subject found in the work of Kant and why he felt able to declare 'the death of man.'

Therefore if we follow this line of argumentation it becomes clear that for Foucault and those writers influenced by him:

> There is no essential self that is distorted or denied by social economic or political structures, only a variety of subjects constituted by and constituting themselves through the interplay of competing discourses and practices. These subjects may be differentially positioned such that some are authorised to speak while others are deemed incompetent, and where the knowledge of some is deemed superior to the knowledge of others, thereby creating matrices of inequality and patterns of pathology and normality that encode populations.[39]

Again such arguments for the constituted self have not been uniformly welcomed by feminist writers and I shall be considering and addressing the difficulties that some believe to be inherent in these poststructuralist accounts in the concluding section of this chapter. However, it is not all bad news for these poststructuralist writers as there are other feminist writers who have found such decentring accounts of subjectivity to be hugely inspiring. It is two such specifically feminist approaches that draw on and are highly influenced by the theories just discussed that I shall now discuss: namely Judith Butler's arguments for the performative subject and the intersectional subject typified in the writings of Maria Lugones.

5. The Performative Subject

So far in this chapter the post-structural critiques of the subject that I have considered have all been written by men who were not overly concerned with feminist thought or theory. For some writers this fact suggests that theories such as

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[39] Lloyd, p. 23

these should not be used to inform feminist debate but others have used these critiques as a basis to develop specifically feminist accounts of identity and subjectivity. One such writer is Judith Butler whose arguments draw on and develop those ideas found in both Foucault's and Derrida's work.

In her seminal work *Gender Trouble* Butler's primary target was to challenge, as she saw it, the 'heterosexism at the core of sexual difference fundamentalism.'[40] In order to do this Butler took as her starting point the concepts of sex and gender and demonstrated how they are often characterised as a hierarchical binary with the male, masculine subject opposing the female, feminine subject. Butler also sought to challenge feminist theorising that she believed held the view that certain expressions of gender are true and original as opposed to those expressions that are categorised as inferior and derivative.[41] It is this aspect of Butler's writing in particular that Lloyd argues is crucial to her conception of the performative subject and it is this concept that I am interested in rather than her contribution to the development of queer theory.

As I have already argued in the introduction to this chapter a large section of feminist thought has been, and indeed still is, guided by the idea that there is something internal to, or at least held in common by, all women and furthermore, according to this approach it is this commonality that makes them women. Therefore, the argument proceeds, it is this shared identity that enables us to talk of the feminine subject and a feminist politics. Butler flatly rejects this idea and argues that 'the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in

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[40] Judith Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, Routledge, 1999), p. viii
[41] Butler, p. viii

which the concrete array of "women" is constructed.'[42] Instead, Butler argues, the self and in particular the gendered self, is to be understood as performative.

The idea of the performative in Butler's work is derived from Austin's arguments in the philosophy of language. Austin developed the idea of the performative to describe how words used in a certain context are also the performance of an act e.g. getting married or opening a meeting. However Butler, following Derrida, moves away from Austin by arguing that there is no autonomous agent as author of these performative utterances:

> In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body through the play of signifying absences that suggest but never reveal the organising principle of identity as cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.[43]

This idea of gender as performance is summed up very succinctly by Lloyd when she argues that, for Butler, gender is not an expression of what one *is* rather it is something that one *does*.[44]

However gender identity is obviously not established or created by a single performative act and for this reason the idea of repetition is also central to the development of Butler's arguments. Again Butler draws on Derrida's argument and particularly his conception of (re)iteration. According to Derrida performative utterances only work because they reiterate a coded model. Furthermore he suggests that such performative utterances can only succeed because of the practice and possibility of citationality or 'general iterability'.[45] For Butler these ideas of iteration and citation, once she has coupled them with a Foucauldian analysis of discourse,

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[42] Butler, pp. 19-20
[43] Butler, p. 173
[44] Lloyd, p. 25
[45] Jaques Derrida 'Signature Event Context' in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York, Columbia University Press, 1991) pp. 103-4

mean that the sexed or gendered subject is simply an effect of the reiteration of a set

of inescapable norms. There is no, as she famously argued, 'do-er behind the deed.'[46]

Moreover, as Lloyd suggests, for Butler this effect of gendered subjectivity is one

that also masks the conventions of which it is a re-citation. Therefore Butler is able

to argue:

> The rules that govern intelligible identity...operate through *repetition*.
> Indeed, when the subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that
> the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that
> govern the intelligible invocation of identity. The subject is not
> *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because
> signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of
> repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely
> through that production of substantialising effects.... "agency" then, is to
> be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition.[47]

What Butler is drawing our attention to here are the ways in which regulatory and

normalising discourses such as biology and education effect sexed bodies and

gendered subjects not through single acts but through constant acts of repetition. So,

for example, our gender is reiterated as male or female every time we get dressed in

gender appropriate clothes, or visit a hairdresser rather than a barber and by our

choice and use of grooming products. Crucially though in the last sentence of the

quote given above Butler begins to indicate how change and resistance to these

gender norms can be achieved through variation within these performances.

As Butler herself argues because there is no pre-existing identity and because gender

itself is provisional there can be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender.

Therefore, Butler argues, we can resist such regulatory discourses through acts of

transgression or mimicry. One such way and a possibility that she spends a

significant amount of time in *Gender Trouble* discussing, is drag because, 'it fully

subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks

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[46] Butler, p. 181
[47] Butler, p. 145

both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity.'[48]

According to Lloyd such an understanding of the performative subject provides a useful addition to both the subject as lack, though Butler herself is highly critical of Lacanian feminist analysis of gender, and the constituted subject as already discussed. This is because, Lloyd argues, Butler's analysis gives us the means to explain how particular subject positions are acquired and sustained.[49] Perhaps most importantly though Butler indicates ways in which these subject positions can be changed, or at least resisted, which is an aspect of analysis that has been missing in those theories that I have discussed up until this point. Lloyd also highlights as a positive aspect, and one which I feel she is right to do so, the way in which (gender) identity, for Butler, is not something that can be achieved once and for all but is constantly regenerated by its constant reiteration on a day to day basis.[50]

6. The Intersectional Subject

The last argument concerning identity and subjectivity that I would like to discuss is the view of the subject that understands it as being coalitional. This is an approach that has found strong support amongst some feminist writers and particularly amongst race and lesbian theorists. And while it can be argued that such an understanding of identity has its roots in Lacanian psychoanalysis the link to poststructuralist theory, as I shall discuss, is not one that is always supported by these writers.

In its simplest terms intersectional identity theory argues that within contemporary society there are multiple sources of identity and difference that we can draw on as individuals, so for example we can identify ourselves through our race, our sexual

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[48] Butler, p. 174
[49] Lloyd, p. 26
[50] Lloyd, p. 26

orientation , our gender and our class. This argument then proceeds to suggest that these multiple sources of identity then overlap or cut across each other in a myriad of ways and in doing so create many different patterns of oppression and it is in this way that they create a multi-dimensional or intersectional identity.[51]

Such subjects inhabit, María Lugones argues, the borderlands of all these different identities.[52] Lugones herself identifies this intersectional subject as *mestiza. Mestiza* is a word used to describe women of dual European and Amerindian heritage and so Lugones argues that 'the *mestiza* consciousness is characterised by the development of a tolerance for contradiction and ambiguity, by the transgression of rigid conceptual boundaries and by the creative breaking of the new unitary aspect of new and old paradigms.'[53]

However, writers such as Lugones are not advocating a simple expansion of boundaries to include that which was previously excluded. This approach, typical of liberal feminism, intersectional theorists maintain is fundamentally flawed. Different groups and different identities cannot simply be added together. Elizabeth Spelman in her book, *Inessential Woman,* famously dubbed this approach the 'pop-bead' strategy after the children's' toy that allowed you to build necklaces by simply popping beads together.[54] Pop-bead approaches do not work because different oppressions interact and influence each other and not necessarily in a beneficial manner. As Bowden and Mummery argue, sexism is based on the paradigm of white women's oppression while racism is based on the paradigm of black men's oppression and 'when they occur together, the two axes interact to create a new relational composite that the terms of its single axis constituents cannot fully

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[51] Peter Bowden and Jane Mummery, *Understanding Feminism* (Stocksfield, Acumen, 2009), p. 105
[52] María Lugones, 'On *Borderlands/La Frontera:* An Interpretive Essay' *Hypatia*, Vol. 7 No.4 (1992), 31-7
[53] Lugones, p. 34
[54] Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston, Beacon, 1988)

capture.'[55]

Intersectional subjects often take the form in feminist theory of *mestizas*, as already mentioned in Lugones' work, but they are also represented as nomads and cyborgs and the literature is full of the imagery of chimeras and hybrids. A cyborg is a creature that is both machine and organism and that is found in fiction and social reality and is an image most closely associated with the work of Donna Harraway. The cyborg, according to Harraway, illustrates the ways in which the perimeters separating nature from culture are transgressed and in doing so the cyborg confuses all models of (identity) categorisation.

Cyborg hybridity in contemporary Western society is, Harraway suggests, both figurative and literal. We are literally cyborgs because we now have engineered, mechanical and technological devices that enable us to prolong our lives, e.g. pacemakers, and also because there are forever more ways of enhancing our bodies that are being made open to us. This last aspect is more prevalent in twenty first century Western culture, I would argue, than perhaps Harraway could ever have imagined in 1985 when 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs' was first published. Body modifications are increasingly popular and financially available so that it is now possible to squeeze minor plastic surgery into a lunch hour. Also I would suggest that such procedures are no longer something to be considered shameful as evidenced by the number of celebrities who are quite happy to admit to having had plastic surgery and also by the enormous rise in the number of people sporting openly visible embellishments such as tattoos and piercings. In line with Harraway's arguments therefore it would appear that Western societies are more and more accepting and welcoming of such cyborg hybridity. What is important here in terms

[55] Bowden and Mummery, p. 107

of developing my argument is that figuratively speaking the cyborg 'emblematises the permanent open-endedness of subjectivity, its potential for endless possible (per) mutation.'[56]

Another example of this type of thought in feminist theorising is to be found in Braidotti's arguments about nomads. As Lloyd notes the language may be different but Braidotti when discussing the nomad is in essence describing the same concept of Harraway's cyborg:

> As a figuration of contemporary subjectivity...the nomad is a postmetaphysical, intensive, multiple entity, functioning in a net of interconnections. S/he cannot be reduced to a linear teleological form of subjectivity but is rather the site of multiple connections. S/he is embodied, and therefore cultural; as an artefact, s/he is a technological compound of human and post-human; s/he is complex, endowed with multiple capacities for interconnectedness in the impersonal mode. S/he is a cyborg, but equipped also with an unconscious...S/he is abstract and perfectly operationally real.[57]

The nomad and the cyborg therefore are useful metaphors that allow writers such as Braidotti and Harraway to capture the ways in which subjectivity and identity are not fixed and immutable but are open ended and unstable.[58]

It would appear at this stage that such an intersectional approach to identity is not that different to the post-structural accounts of subjectivity offered above. The similarities are brought to the fore in Bowden and Mummery summation of intersectionality as suggesting that:

> Identity itself is a work in progress, forged by acknowledgement, negotiation and resistance in response to shifting sands of the multiple, personal and institutional relationships in which individuals participate. On these terms identity politics becomes a fragile work in progress, rather than a robust movement for change.[59]

However while this is not a characterisation that Harraway or Braidotti would reject

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[56] Lloyd, p. 16
[57] Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 36
[58] Lloyd, p. 17
[59] Bowden and Mummery, p. 110

it is one that Lugones refuses to accept which she clearly and unequivocally states when she argues that 'all resemblances between this tradition and postmodern literature is co-incidental, though the conditions that underlie both may well be significantly tied the implications of each are very different from one another.'[60]

In the next section of this chapter I will move on to consider Lugones's, and other feminist writers concerns and their reticence to identify with postmodern or poststructural critiques of the subject. I will examine the dangers that they see in adopting such an approach before proposing an account of identity that is sensitive to their concerns but that does not signal a return to the Kantian transcendental subject.

7. A Return to the Centre?

Though there are significant theoretical differences between all the different theories of the subject and subjectivity that I have discussed above what does link all of these accounts is the idea that there is no unitary or essentialist concept of Woman that can be given that could adequately describe the realities of women's plural, multifaceted and complex lives. As I acknowledged at the beginning of this chapter this anti-essentialism can be understood in two ways. First, there is the assertion that there is nothing essential to the category of woman but there remains a unitary self. Second, there is the anti-essentialism that I have been discussing in some depth that argues that there is no essential, universal, centred, transcendental self. My contention is that while there are problems with the critique of the subject it succeeds in demolishing its target so completely that I do not believe that it is possible to return and understand the concept of the self or identity in its traditional guise. The Kantian ideal of a transcendent subject or even Freud's rational subject of the Enlightenment conception is illusory, it does not exist. However, the argument does not end there.

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[60] María Lugones, 'Purity, Impurity, and Separation' in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorising Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Oxford, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2003), p. 121

It is clear that many of the accounts discussed above are not specifically feminist and provide instead a critique of the subject qua subject and so the question then becomes why feminist writers have paid so much attention to these arguments? I think these arguments have gained such a hold in feminist theory because their acknowledgement of the subject as situated allows feminists to actively reject the idea that there is something essentially feminine while still engaging with an analysis of gendered behaviour. Therefore, feminist theory, I believe, can no longer begin from a conception of the subject as stable and unitary but must instead find a way of understanding and incorporating into its politics a subject that is in-process, contingent and indeterminate. We have come a long way from Kant!

This is not, however, a position that can be adopted without first having to consider and answer to a high level of criticism and concern of the critique of the subject and not all of it is specifically feminist. At the more extreme and radical end of poststructuralist theory such theories often portray themselves as being exhilarating and libratory suggesting that with no essential, defining, core self we are able to become the masters of our own creation, we can pick and choose our identities, trying them on and discarding them like the latest fashions.

A similar approach I believe is found when the idea of play as a means of developing personal and political agency is introduced and which occurs in a number of postmodernist accounts of subjectivity and identity. One such approach is found in Richard Rorty's work According to Rorty, Freud's theories (or at least Rorty's own particularly idiosyncratic and deconstructivist interpretation of his work) are instrumental in allowing us to see and understand ourselves as decentred and as random assemblages of contingent and idiosyncratic needs instead of, as more or less adequate, examples of a universal human essence. Therefore, Rorty argues, it is

largely due to Freud that we no longer carry around the idea that we have a one –true self that is in some sense shared by all other human beings and furthermore we no longer feel that the demands of this true self are more important than any other we might experience.[61] The consequence of viewing ourselves in such a manner is that new forms of life are opened up to us where we can be 'increasingly ironic, playful, free and inventive in our choice of self-descriptions.'[62]

However, as Charles Guignon suggests, the concern for many writers, not just philosophers but psychiatrists as well, is that the reality of such theories is that they advocate and carry the very real 'risk of fragmentation and dissociation of the self as an agent in the world.'[63] Though such fragmentation is posited as a risk by Guignon it is the case that some extremely radical poststructuralist thinkers see this as the positive end result of the critique of the subject so much so that Baudrillard goes so far as to celebrate the schizoid as the paradigm of subjectivity.[64] However, Guignon goes on to argue, what such thinkers may not realise is the damage that can be done by undercutting or demeaning the role of a centralized and cohesive self in dealing with some psychotic disorders e.g. schizophrenia. A very similar argument is made by Sayers when he suggests that:

> Assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, such a detached ironic,
> playful 'true' self is implicitly presupposed in much of this literature.
> Once this sense of identity really begins to disappear, once the self
> begins to dissolve without remainder into a series of fragmentary 'false'
> selves, then the self is on the road to psychotic breakdown, which few of
> these writers seriously advocate.[65]

This is an argument that is echoed in Guignon's position when he suggests that those who celebrate and call for a decentred self are actually being self-deceptively naïve

[61] Richard Rorty, 'Freud and Moral Reflection' in *Philosophical Papers Vol. 2: Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 143-163
[62] Rorty, p. 155
[63] Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, (London, Routledge, 2004) p. 123
[64] McNay, p. 75
[65] Sayers, p. 157

and unaware of the basic cohesion within themselves that makes the fragmentation of experience something other than a frightening slide into psychosis.

While feminist thought is not insensitive to those concerns arising from therapeutic writings their criticism of poststructuralist thought naturally takes a different focus. Adopting such a conception of the decentred subject involves refusing the belief that feminist politics can only exist if it is possible to talk about a stable and unitary subject. Without such an account many feminist writers have argued that it would become impossible to make political demands or act autonomously which are both necessary aspects of agency if women are to challenge the structures of oppression. The question such theorists want answered is, how is it possible to be self-determining or self-directed without a self? Indeed arguments for the postmodern deconstructed and decentred subject have, it can be argued without any extreme exaggeration, incited 'palpable feminist panic.'[66] A typical response to the adoption of the decentred subject by feminists is to be found when Jane Flax, a psychoanalyst and philosopher, argues that:

> Post modernists intend to persuade us that we should be suspicious of a notion of the self and subjectivity. However, I am deeply suspicious of the motives of those who would counsel such a position at the same time as women have just begun to re-member their selves and claim an agentic subjectivity available always before only to a few privileged white men. It is possible that unconsciously, rather than share such a [revised] subjectivity with the 'others' the privileged would reassure us that it was really oppressive to them all along.[67]

I am not convinced that the poststructuralist movement was acting, or indeed continues to act, on such covert or indeed conspiratorially chauvinistic motives. I am aware of the reality that feminist writers should always be aware of possible sexist attitudes or bias within the works that they are engaging with and reading but if, as

[66] Wendy Brown, 'Feminist Hesitation, Postmodern Exposures' *differences*, Vol.3 No. 1 (1991), p. 71
[67] Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments; Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), p. 220

feminists, we were to reject every thesis and subject that downplayed, denigrated or simply ignored women and their experiences then there would not be much philosophy left to read!

However, I do think that Jean Grimshaw makes a valid and interesting point when she argues that while feminist thought should engage critically with theories that deconstruct the distinction between the social and the individual and make problematic the idea of the original, authentic, unitary self that feminist thinkers should also maintain a connection with theories that are concerned with actual lived experience and the practical and material struggles that women face in order to achieve autonomy and control in their lives.[68] This is one aspect of the, very pointed, argument that Martha Nussbaum made in her highly critical article of Judith Butler's philosophy 'The Professor of Parody' where she accuses Butler of quietism and empty politics:

> There is a void, then, at the heart of Butler's notion of politics. This void can look liberating...But let there be no mistake: for Butler as for Foucault, subversion is subversion, and it can in principle go in any direction. Indeed Butler's naïvely empty politics is especially dangerous for the very causes she holds dear. For every friend of Butler, eager to engage in subversive performances that proclaim the repressiveness of heterosexual gender norms, there are dozens who would like to engage in subversive performances that flout the norms of tax compliance, of non-discrimination, of decent treatment of one's fellow students. To such people we should say, you cannot simply resist as you please, for there are norms of fairness, decency and dignity that entail that this is bad behaviour. But then we have to articulate those norms - and this Butler fails to do.[69]

There are, I believe three separate yet connected arguments at work here. First, that philosophy must connect to our lives as lived, second, that resistance should not be celebrated purely for its own sake and finally, Nussbaum is questioning the celebration of fragmentation that can be seen as characterising poststructuralist

[68] Jean Grimshaw, 'Autonomy and Identity in Feminist Thinking' in *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy*, ed. M. Griffiths and M. Whitford (London, The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988), p. 105

[69] Martha Nussbaum 'Professor of Parody', *The New Republic*, Vol. 220 No.8 (1999), 37-45

thought. This third argument I have already dealt in some depth with and so it remains for me to consider, in reverse order, the second and then the first. Briefly stated, I think Nussbaum is completely right to challenge the idea that resistance is good purely by dint of being resistance. There has to be, as she argues, an articulation of the norms that we would wish to resist within.

Finally, it is my firm belief that feminism can only work as a politics if it is directly engaged with the actual lived experiences of all women and not just those academic, highly educated writers who are able to engage with such highly theoretical accounts of the self and indeed of politics. This is a similar point to the one that I raised against Freidman in Chapter Two in my discussion of the symbolic critique of autonomy. I think not to accept this point would be an act of folly but I do not think that this acceptance is necessarily coupled to a further acceptance of the concept of a centred, immutable self. With increasing globalisation and its growing effects of multiculturalism it is going to become more and more the case that such complex identities with multiple ascriptions are going to become the norm. Therefore I feel that ideas of intersectionality and of the self being 'in-process' based on the fact that our lives are becoming indisputably more plural and multifaceted will become ever more relevant and salient to any discussion of identity.

On a related, though slightly different note, I am similarly convinced by the arguments of Diana Tietjens Meyers who supports the idea of play that was discussed earlier to the extent that playfulness when understood as being imaginative and as freeing up one's will can be one way of achieving autonomy . However, and I believe rightly, she then goes on to caution that:

> Conflating agency with play threatens to reduce agency to the randomness and arbitrariness of acting on impulse. Members of subordinated groups cannot afford to be seen this way [...] for being cast

as a 'playmate' is infantilising (all too reminiscent of being cast as a plaything), and this belittlement allows other to decline to take their grievances seriously. Nor can members of subordinated groups afford to see members of privileged groups who are mobilising to defend their dominant status as playmates, for construing their retrograde politics as play would exclude them from accountability.[70]

8. Conclusion

What I believe that the arguments considered in this chapter have demonstrated is

that postmodern thought has shown our traditional philosophical accounts of the self

to be inadequate. At the same time however it has also become clear that adopting an

approach which advocates understanding the self as radically fragmented and

inchoate such as that found in the writings of Lacan and Derrida is also

unacceptable.

Therefore what I will argue for next is a sense of identity that does not require an

immutable or a monotonously consistent core self and demonstrate that it is possible

to talk of a decentred and processual subjectivity that is at the same time compatible

with a sense of personal identity.[71] Once I have established this I will then go on to

discuss how this sense of personal identity is compatible with a reconfigured

conception of autonomy.

[70] Diana Tietjens Meyers, 'Intersectional Identity and Authentic Self? Opposites Attract', in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. C. Mackenzie and N. Stoljar (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 168
[71] Meyers, p. 164

Chapter 4: Narrative Identity

The previous chapter demonstrated that any feminist account of self or agency should be aware of, and sensitive to, the arguments made by those theories that we can loosely categorise as poststructural and that constitute the critique of the subject. I have been convinced by those arguments that develop out of the poststructuralist critique of the self which reject the idea of the unitary self and, with it, the picture of the self as a 'stable centre incorrigibly present to itself and negotiating with its surrounding world from within its own securely established borders of knowing and willing.'[1] However, I do not believe that, in accepting these arguments, I am therefore also automatically committed to accepting a conception of the self as fiction or even, if not a fiction, then radically fragmented and disjointed. Rather I shall argue that it is possible to construct an account of the self that is not reliant on an immutable core or a 'brain pearl', as Dennett terms it, but that is still coherent and capable of being autonomous.[2] The way to achieve such an account, I will argue, is to understand the self as having a narrative identity.

1. MacIntyre and Taylor

There is a huge and readily available literature concerning narrative and narrative identity and so I do not propose to provide a complete review of all the available thoughts and theories concerning this area of inquiry. Instead I will focus my attention on a number of key theorists and most particularly on the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. I shall begin however by considering those ideas of narrative developed by Alasdair MacIntyre in his seminal work *After Virtue*.

Crucial to understanding MacIntyre's work is recognising his commitment to a number of Aristotelian principles which underpin and support all of his arguments.

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[1] Joseph Dunne, 'The Storied Self,' in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. R. Kearney (London, Sage Publications, 1996), p. 139

[2] Daniel Dennett, 'The Reality of Selves', in *Consciousness Explained* (Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1991), p. 424

Not least amongst these commitments is MacIntyre's belief that modernity's current moral malaise (as he diagnoses it) can be resolved only by a return to and acceptance of a moral belief system based on an Aristotelian conception of virtue. I am not concerned here either with MacIntyre's diagnosis of modernity's moral failings or with his proposed remedy but specifically with his account of narrative identity, though admittedly it is difficult at times to separate out these issues because they are so closely tied together in MacIntyre's work.

In terms of narrative identity the key move in MacIntyre's argument comes when he argues that such an Aristotelian account of the virtues carries with it a concomitant understanding of selfhood. Such an understanding MacIntyre suggests is a 'concept of the self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end.'[3] So, according to MacIntyre, each human life is (or should be) a unified narrative. However, he continues, modern life renders this narrative unity both socially and philosophically invisible. Socially because modernity radically partitions and segments human life and philosophically because analytic philosophy has a tendency to understand and explain actions atomistically, while existential thinking, and some sociological theorising too, promotes a strong separation between individuals and the roles that they play.[4] This is the same criticism of substantive individualism that I considered in more feminist terms back in Chapter Two while discussing the metaphysical critique of autonomy. MacIntyre understands both of these tendencies, social and philosophical, as entirely detrimental and it is in trying to counter these developments that he argues for a narrative understanding of identity.

MacIntyre begins his account of narrative by first developing a theory of action that

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[3] Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edition (London, Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 1985), p. 205
[4] MacIntyre, p. 204

understands as crucial the settings and the context in which any action takes place. Actions, for MacIntyre, cannot be understood as single, isolatable events. Rather they have an essentially historical character and so they can only be understood, or in his terms, made intelligible, by discovering the narratives in which they play a part:

> Just as a history is not a sequence of actions, but the concept of an action is that of a moment in an actual or possible history abstracted for some purpose from that history, so the characters in a history are not a collection of persons, but the concept of a person is that of a character abstracted from a history.[5]

It is clear to see then that human action, for MacIntyre, is only intelligible to the extent that it is placed within a temporally ordered and unified narrative sequence and indeed he goes so far as to argue that 'narrative history...turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterisation of human actions.'[6]

It is through this construction of historical narratives that we become, MacIntyre argues, authors, 'because man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.'[7] However he does acknowledge that 'we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives'[8] because we are all born into narratives that have been running since long before we are born and that contain many other characters or individuals besides us. Narratives, for MacIntyre, do not just run along parallel lines but rather they are embedded in each other and while, 'In my drama, perhaps, I am Hamlet or Iago ... to you I am only a Gentleman or at best Second Murderer, while you are my Polonius or my Gravedigger, but your own hero.'[9]

A useful and perhaps more contemporary example of how narrative works in this enmeshed and relational fashion is to consider the structure of long running

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[5] MacIntyre, p. 202
[6] MacIntyre, p. 208
[7] MacIntyre, p. 216
[8] MacIntyre, p. 213
[9] MacIntyre, pp. 213-4

television soap operas such as `East Enders' and `Coronation Street'. Such soap operas operate with a huge cast of characters that interact to differing degrees but all form part of the same community. New characters are often introduced into this community and this is frequently achieved by bringing them into pre-existing story lines and scenarios. These new characters then have their own stories interwoven into these already existing and enduring plot lines. It is also worth noting too how characters are written out and leave (and then return, even from the dead!) yet the stories and plot lines continue onwards just as indicated in MacIntyre's arguments. Finally, the appeal of such programmes, it is often argued, lies in their portrayal of day to day life. I would suggest that while it is true that the outlandish plotlines many soap characters have to endure may not be within the ordinary experiences of the people watching, the continuing appeal of these programmes rests, in part, on their recognisable narrative structure, this is how our lives run too.

Returning to MacIntyre, it would seem that there is much to be said in favour of his narrative theory but, as already noted, his account of personal identity is inextricably bound up with his Aristotelian moral theory of virtues. For MacIntyre the link between identity and the virtues lies in understanding that personal narratives should be understood as taking a specific form. The narrative genre that he specifies is the form of a quest and most particularly a quest for the good. MacIntyre makes this explicitly clear when he argues:

> The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests
> sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions;
> and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for
> success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or
> failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest.[10]

What MacIntyre principally has in mind here is the idea of a medieval quest and he highlights and draws out two aspects of this genre in particular. First, the concept of

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[10] MacIntyre, p. 219

the quest contains within it the idea that there can in fact be some understanding of

the good for man. Secondly MacIntyre draws attention to the way in which there is a

revelatory aspect to undertaking a quest so that:

> It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping
> with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations and distractions
> which provide the quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of
> the quest is finally to be understood. A quest is always an education both
> as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge.[11]

Furthermore, in line with the account of virtue ethics that he is developing MacIntyre

argues that it is not the stories that we enact as individuals that are of primary

importance but rather it is those that we find ourselves born into that are fundamental

because it is these foundational or master narratives that are the source of our moral

normativity. These foundational narratives explain who we are as a people and how

we came to be this particular 'we' and for MacIntyre this is of crucial significance:

> The history of a practice in our time is generally and characteristically
> embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer
> history of the tradition through which the practice in its present form was
> conveyed to us; the history of our own lives is generally and
> characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the
> larger and longer histories of a number of traditions.[12]

While there is much in MacIntyre's work to recommend it, his rejection of

substantively independent individualism for example, there are also, I believe, a

number of strong criticisms and concerns that can be made of his approach that need

to be considered and addressed. However before moving on to consider these

problems I would like to briefly outline and consider another theory of narrative

identity developed by Charles Taylor, in his book, *Sources of the Self*. I want to look

at Taylor here because not only has his work also had a considerable impact on

understandings of the narrative self but it can also be seen as developing some

similar themes to MacIntyre's and therefore as being vulnerable to some of the same

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[11] MacIntyre, p. 219
[12] MacIntyre, p. 222

criticisms.

Like MacIntyre, Taylor believes that our selfhood is inextricably bound up with concepts of the good. Indeed Taylor goes so far as to argue that without a framework of the good we have no self because 'to know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.'[13] This orientation is so fundamental to Taylor that he likens it to knowing how our bodies are physically orientated:

> to the extent that we move back, we determine what we are by what we have become, by the story of how we got there. Orientation in moral space turns out ...to be similar to orientation in physical space. We know where we are through a mixture of recognition of landmarks before us and a sense of how we travelled to get here. [14]

Crucially though, Taylor recognises that our relationship to the good is not a static one. It is a dynamic and changing relationship because our lives are dynamic and ever changing too. It is clearly true that most of us grow, change and develop over time. Indeed this growth and change is what we hope for and expect in our children. Furthermore and though it is not a view of the self that Taylor would endorse it would also follow that if we reject the idea of an immutable core self and accept that the self is decentred this dynamism becomes an unavoidable fact of our subjectivity.

Returning to Taylor, he argues that as we change as individuals so too does our orientation towards the good. However this change is not only in one direction and according to Taylor we may at different times in our lives find ourselves moving both closer towards and further away from the good. Such a dynamic relationship to the good has, for Taylor, important implications for our self understanding which he sums up very neatly when he argues:

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[13] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press,1989), p. 28
[14] Taylor,1989, p. 48

> in order to make minimal sense of our lives, in order to have an identity, we need an orientation to the good...Now we see that this sense of the good has to be woven into my understanding of my life as an unfolding story. But this is to state another basic condition of making sense of ourselves, that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*.[15]

However, for Taylor it is also important to grasp the idea that narrative understanding is not just about the structuring and ordering of our present situations but that it also involves us making decisions about and projecting ourselves into our futures. This is because, he argues, these projections into the future are determined by our current orientation towards the good and so 'I project a future story, not just the state of the momentary future but a bent for my whole life to come.'[16] It is with these arguments that Taylor most explicitly aligns himself with MacIntyre even going so far as to agree that we 'must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a 'quest.'[17]

2. Criticisms of MacIntyre and Taylor

As important as both Taylor and MacIntyre's works have been for the development and the bringing to the fore of narrative understandings of personal identity there are, as I indicated earlier, a number of problems with their accounts. In her book, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair,* Hilde Nelson argues that MacIntyre's reliance on foundational, master narratives simultaneously excludes many individuals who are unable to identify with these traditions while at the same problematically including others but this time by characterising their lives as unsuccessful.[18] Nelson also queries how individuals who occupy liminal positions in society are to understand themselves under MacIntyre's analysis, for example the *mestiza* of Lugones's analysis or transgendered individuals as discussed in Chapter Three. As she argues, the people in these groups cannot invoke those stories, or

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[15] Taylor, 1989, p. 47
[16] Taylor, 1989, p. 48
[17] Taylor, 1989, p. 51
[18] Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (London, Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 59

foundational narratives, of their communities to justify their rightful places within those same communities. Furthermore, Nelson continues, this exclusion not only deprives such individuals from participating and contributing to their communities it also prevents them from exercising those capacities which their communities value.[19]

This charge of conservatism against MacIntyre is well rehearsed and has been made by a number of commentators from within feminist thought. Consider the following passage from MacIntyre:

> It is through his or her membership in a variety of social groups that the individual identifies himself or herself and is identified by others. I am brother, cousin and grandson, member of this household, that village, this tribe. These are not characteristics that belong to humans accidentally, to be stripped away to discover 'the real me.' They are part of my substance, defining partially at least and wholly sometimes my obligations and my duties. Individuals inherit a particular space within an interlocking set of social relationships; lacking that space, they are nobody, or at best a stranger or an outcast.[20]

As Linda Barclay notes there are aspects to this passage that chime well with feminist thought, for example, the idea that we are persons only by dint of the fact that we are born into and (most of us) remain within in a web of social relations, our lives are enmeshed. However, what troubles feminists like Barclay, is MacIntyre's insistence that such inherited relationships are necessary and that if we move beyond this space we become 'a nobody' or 'an outcast'.[21] Barclay continues by pointing out that much feminist effort has been spent demonstrating how such inherited roles can be detrimental to women's lives. She finishes by quoting Penny Weiss's pithy retort that, 'Communitarians are concerned with the *loss* of traditional boundaries while feminists are concerned with the *costs* of those boundaries.'[22]

However these problems with MacIntyre's works are not just limited to relations

[19] Nelson, pp. 59-60
[20] MacIntyre, p. 32
[21] Linda Barclay, 'Autonomy and the Social Self', in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self*, eds. C. MacKenzie and N. Stoljar (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 67
[22] Barclay, p. 47

within communities but can also be seen as characterising relations between different communities or traditions. As John Arras notes, 'foundational stories not only tell us who we are; they tell us who we are not.'[23] Nelson, in developing this point, goes on to argue that often these 'not' relationships involve the domination of one group over another so that the 'Other' often figures as an objectified element rather than as a subject in their own right.[24]

Such criticisms were not unknown to MacIntyre and he did, in later books such as *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* try to offer an account of how social change happens and can be accommodated. However, as Nelson notes his main focus of concern is how this process is to be handled between competing traditions. MacIntyre believes that the process of change can be handled by recognising that an old narrative is in epistemological crisis and no longer capable of answering the questions asked of it. So for example, the liberal tradition can no longer, according to MacIntyre, answer the moral questions asked of it and so we find ourselves in a situation of moral relativism. Once this happens, MacIntyre argues, members of the tradition in crisis can then look around for a new narrative that is capable of solving the problems faced by the community. MacIntyre continues by arguing that the adoption of such new and better narratives constitutes (epistemological and moral) progress. Therefore Nelson argues that MacIntyre's contention is that 'the new story is *better* than the old at solving the problems set for it – "better" according to the evaluative standards inherent in the old narrative tradition – so we have not settled for a mere succession of one story after another.'[25] However as Nelson notes such an argument demonstrates MacIntyre's complete failure to recognise that the

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[23] John Arras, 'Nice Story But So What? Narrative and Justification in Ethics,' in H. Nelson *Stories and Their Limits: Narrative Approaches to Bioethics* (New York, Routledge, 1997), p. 75
[24] Nelson, p. 60
[25] Nelson, p. 61

disenfranchised or subordinated members of this tradition were in epistemological

crisis all along.[26] Such members of the community, Nelson argues:

> cannot rely on the modes of thought and evaluation made available by
> the tradition, because they are either alienated from those modes or
> connected to them in morally troublesome ways. This is not to say that
> they can't at all draw on the resources implicit in the standing narratives.
> But it does mean that they have to approach those narratives with
> suspicion and distrust, and that they must continually challenge their
> authority. [27]

While it cannot be denied that such groups will develop their own narratives I think

Nelson's argument is that they are in many ways prevented from accessing such

powerful meta-narratives. Furthermore, while Nelson is not talking specifically

about autonomy in this passage it seems to me that she could well be characterising

the relationship between mainstream accounts of the concept and the concerns

expressed by many of the feminist thinkers I am considering in this thesis.

The conservatism of MacIntyre, and Taylor too, can also be seen at work in the fact

that they only recognise one narrative form as being suitable to describe fully human

lives, that of the quest. There are clearly many different forms of narrative available

to us not just that of the quest for the good and as Nelson quite rightly argues it

seems strange to think that our lives should all conform to just one archetypal plot.

Indeed as she suggests it is perfectly feasible to imagine our lives following different

plot types at different times.[28]

Another area of concern with those theories of narrative identity as described by

MacIntyre and Taylor and that relates directly to my discussion of autonomy has

been raised by Margaret Walker. Walker highlights the way in which the idea of a

career self underpins the work of a diverse range of philosophers such as Rawls and

Williams and most pertinently as being present in the thinking of MacIntyre and

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[26] Nelson, p. 61
[27] Nelson, p. 61
[28] Nelson, pp. 63-64

Taylor. She identifies the career self as representing:

> the idea of an individual's life as a self-consciously controlled career. It binds a whole life or lifetime together in a unified way for which the individual is accountable, the individual's ability to account for his life -to bring forward its plan, project or narrative plot –testifies to the individuals *self* -control. The imagery in each case recycles the cultural theme of autonomous agency, with its self conscious individual enterprise.[29]

Furthermore Walker argues that this concept of the career self with its co-existent principle of autonomy was never an ideal intended for women nor is it, she contends, an idea that is sympathetic to any individual who finds themselves weak, frail or dependent on others for their care. Therefore she argues that whole life narratives are not a 'necessary expression' of personhood but rather describe the type of person required by a 'specific economic and institutionalised environment,'[30] Elsewhere Walker suggests that our lives should be thought of as a yarn that can be spun like Wittgenstein's thread so that no one single fibre runs continuous length but its strength can be found in the overlapping of a multitude of fibres.[31] This is of course entirely contradicts Taylor when he argues 'that there is something like an *a priori* unity of a human life through its whole extent.'[32] I think Walker is right to criticise these theorists for these reasons which are at heart the same criticisms of substantive individualism and its concomitant account of autonomy that I have already discussed and considered in my second chapter.

A final group of criticisms that I want to consider are given by Paul Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another* and relate specifically to MacIntyre's approach. It is here that Ricoeur considers MacIntyre's assertion that in order for our lives to be considered successful or complete we must be able to grasp them as a 'singular totality.'[33]

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[29] Margaret Urban Walker 'Getting out of Line: Alternatives to Life as a Career' in *Moral Contexts* (Oxford, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2003), p. 194
[30] Walker, 2003, p. 195-6
[31] Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (New York, Routledge, 1998), p. 147
[32] Taylor, 1989, p. 51
[33] Paul Ricoeur , *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 160

However, Ricoeur argues:

> There is nothing in real life that serves as a narrative beginning; memory
> is lost in the hazes of early childhood; my birth, and with greater reason,
> the act through which I was conceived belong more to the history of
> others – in this case to my parents – than to me. As for my death, it will
> finally be recounted only in the stories of those who survive me. I am
> always moving towards my death, and this prevents me from ever
> grasping it as a narrative end.[34]

It is not only this criticism that Ricoeur identifies as causing a problem for

MacIntyre's theory of narrative unity. He also suggests that the entangled nature of

our lives that MacIntyre stresses so forcefully in *After Virtue* is a problem for

narrative identity theory. It is precisely in this entanglement of stories, Ricoeur

argues, that life histories differ from literary ones because novels, unlike life stories,

relate plots that are self-contained and incommensurable.[35] Similar criticisms to

these of MacIntyre's approach are to be found in Bernard Williams', posthumously

published, article 'Life as Narrative.' Here Williams suggests that:

> The life of a fictional character is necessarily something that our lives are
> not, a given whole...they have a special unity that no real life can have,
> that the end of them is present at the beginning. This peculiar unity of
> their lives cannot help us in trying to find coherence in our own.[36]

Williams also raises the question against MacIntyre of how it is that we can find

coherence in narrative when it is not possible to identify the 'right kind of narrative

without already having the idea of a coherent life.'[37]

Given these problems with narrative identity, as highlighted by Walker, Ricoeur and

Williams, it may seem that such an approach is not capable of supporting the work

that I want it to. The case for this argument would seem to be particularly strong in

light of Walker's arguments that narrative identity both supports, and is supported

by, a concept of autonomy that I have already rejected. Furthermore, both Taylor and

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[34] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 160
[35] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 161
[36] Bernard Williams, 'Life as Narrative', *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 17 No. 2 (2007), 305-14, (p. 311)
[37] Williams, p. 309

MacIntyre in their accounts of a narrative self are also committed to an understanding of a unified self but again this is also an idea that I have found to be wanting. It would seem at this point that my arguments for a decentred yet coherent self that is capable of being autonomous are in trouble. They may yet be but I do not think that the idea of narrative identity is exhausted yet. As Ricoeur argues at the end of his discussion of MacIntyre, 'all of these arguments [against narrative] are perfectly acceptable...nevertheless, they do not seem to me to be as such as to abolish the very notion of the *application* of fiction to life. The objections are valid only in opposition to a naïve conception of *mimesis.* [38] So therefore while Ricoeur, as will become clear, wants to argue for a conception of narrative identity he believes that MacIntyre's approach is flawed because he is reliant on a mistaken and simplistic conception of mimesis. In a similar manner I believe Ricoeur would not accept Williams' rejection of narrative on the grounds that he too is using this mistaken understanding of mimesis. What I think Ricoeur means here by a naïve conception of mimesis is the idea that art simply, or merely imitates or copies life or indeed in the case of narrative identity that life is imitating art. What Ricoeur believes to be a more fruitful understanding of mimesis will be discussed in the following sections.

Therefore, I think that it is possible to answer some of these problems and develop an account of the self and autonomy that is not reliant on the formulations of narrative theory as considered so far. With this in mind, and in light of the arguments just considered, I will now turn to and examine the arguments for not only a more complex conception of mimesis but also a more robust conception of narrative identity as developed by Paul Ricoeur.

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[38] Paul Ricoeur, 1992, p. 161

3. Ricoeur and Narrative

Ricoeur explicitly described his work on the self as a grafting of hermeneutics onto phenomenology.[39] Therefore it is in keeping with this claim and makes sense when Ricoeur argues that his 'hermeneutics of the self can claim to hold itself at an equal distance from the cogito exalted by Descartes and from the cogito that Nietzsche proclaimed forfeit.'[40] It can be seen already then that Ricoeur positions himself between the sovereign self of traditional analytic philosophy and the displaced and fragmented self of the potstructuralists.

Ricoeur's work on narrative and narrative identity is remarkably rich and complex. I think it is worth noting at this point that Ricoeur himself draws on MacIntyre's work and also that Taylor refers to Ricoeur and his work in *Sources of the Self.* However I believe that Ricoeur offers a deeper analysis of narrative and narrative identity than either MacIntyre or Taylor and that I should be able to answer many of the concerns outlined above through a consideration of his ideas. I shall begin considering Ricoeur's work by looking at his account of time.

For Ricoeur, time and narrative form a 'healthy' or virtuous hermeneutical circle because 'the world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world...; narrative in turn is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience'.[41] However what Ricoeur means and understands here by a 'temporal world' and 'temporal experience' needs to be broken down and explained in greater detail.

First, Ricoeur understands human action as taking place in the sphere of historical time which in turn arises out of two more elementary senses of time; cosmic and

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[39] Paul Ricoeur, 'Intellectual Autobiography,' in *Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. L.E. Hahn (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, Open Court, 1995), p. 16
[40] Paul Ricoeur, 1992, p. 23
[41] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 3

lived or, as it is also referred to sometimes, phenomenological time. Cosmic time is simply 'the sequence of uniform [and] qualitatively undifferentiated moments' while phenomenological time is the time of our lived experiences in which some moments stand out and carry greater significance while others fade into obscurity. While Ricoeur's concept of historical time cannot do without cosmic time it is this idea of lived time that is of greater interest and needs more explanation when considering his ideas of narrative and personal identity. In developing these ideas he draws on phenomenological understandings of time that can be traced back in the first instance to St. Augustine of Hippo but were developed more fully in the twentieth century by Husserl and Heidegger.[42]

Such phenomenological theories can be seen as a response to the more 'rationalist' Aristotelian or Kantian conceptions of time which see the present as a point in time that simply gives way to the next point in succession. The problem with such accounts is that they allow gaps or *aporias* in our understanding to open up. These arise because if time is just a series of 'nows' then whenever I say 'now' the present has already moved into the past and so 'the paradox is that the word 'now' which refers to the present, can never actually refer to the present, since as soon as the word is uttered, it is in the past.'[43] The problem can be neatly explained in mathematical terms by arguing that the 'now-point' of the present lacks extension, it is infinitesimally small.

The answer to this problem, or at least the approach adopted by St. Augustine, is to understand the present as being three-fold.[44] That is to say that not only does the present exist for us but so too does the past, in our memories, and the future, in our

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[42] Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, ed. M. Heidegger, trans. J.S. Churchill (Indiana University Press, 1964), Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Blackwell, 1962)
[43] Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur* (Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2003), p. 81
[44] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. H. Chadwick (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991)

hopes and expectations. However, in order to grasp both our past and our future we must stretch or be distended in either direction. So, for St. Augustine, the lack of extension of the present is overcome by the distension of the mind and so we have a continuous present that contains both the present and the future within it:

> For the mind expects and attends and remembers, so that what it expects passes through what has its attention to what it remembers. Who therefore can deny that the future does not yet exist? Yet already in the mind there is an expectation of the future. Who can deny that the past does not now exist? Yet there is still in the mind a memory of the past. None can deny that present time lacks any extension because it passes in a flash. Yet attention is continuous, and it is through this that what will be present progresses towards being absent.[45]

Furthermore, for Augustine, and indeed for later phenomenological theories, it is part of the human condition to exist 'within' time.

Ricoeur also picks up on and develops Augustine's assertion that time is the result of the 'unfolding of words and sentences in discourse –no word has meaning in isolation, then meaning is produced and understood within time.'[46] Having accepted this it follows then for Ricoeur, as a result of the hermeneutical circle I outlined at the beginning, that the discourse that is richest in human meaning is narrative. Now that this is established I shall move on to consider what Ricoeur understands as narrative and how he relates this to ideas of identity.

Central to Ricoeur's narrative theory is his theory of mimesis and, as was indicated during my discussion of his criticisms of MacIntyre, he does not provide a simplistic account of this concept. Indeed Ricoeur's account is not based on the theory of mimesis as developed by Plato but rather it is the version argued for by Aristotle that he turns to. So, for Ricoeur, mimesis is not the imitation of nature but is instead the imitation of an action.[47] However Ricoeur is not content to just borrow Aristotle's

[45] St. Augustine, p. 243
[46] Simms, p. 83
[47] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume One*, trans.K.cLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago, University of Chicago Press,

theory and so he goes on to develop his own understanding of mimesis as a threefold process that, as we shall see, corresponds and ties into Augustine's idea of the threefold present. It is here too in Ricoeur's ideas concerning mimesis that we shall see the idea of emplotment or *muthos,* which again has its beginnings in Aristotle, and is crucial to so much of Ricoeur's work, come to the fore.

As I have said, mimesis for Ricoeur is a threefold process that he terms Mimesis$_1$, Mimesis$_2$ and Mimesis$_3$.[48] Mimesis$_1$ is pre-figurative and describes the 'preliminary competence' in understanding what human action is that is required for us to comprehend a narrative plot. In other words Ricoeur is describing the fact that in approaching a plot we are already asking questions like what, why, who, how and when?[49] Furthermore and according to Ricoeur we ask such questions because we have a practical understanding of plot that is anchored in our everyday life. Mimesis$_1$ can, therefore, be understood as a pre-understanding of narrative which is comprised of semantic (understanding that X did Y to A because of B), symbolic (understanding that the hero of the plot should be interpreted as a 'good' character) and temporal (that X should do Y because of A's actions in the past) understandings.[50] It is in this temporal aspect of his argument that Ricoeur relies on not only on Heidegger's notion of pre-understanding but also his ideas of 'within-time-ness.'

In its simplest terms 'within-time-ness' is to be distinguished from linear conceptions of time and instead is to be understood as referring to our 'relation to time as that "within which" we ordinarily act.'[51] To illustrate this difference Ricoeur considers Heidegger's arguments about our use of the word 'now' in our day to day

1984), p. 34
[48] Ricoeur, 1984, p. 46
[49] Ricoeur, 1984, p. 55
[50] Simms, p. 84
[51] Ricoeur, 1984, p.61-2

lives and quotes him approvingly when he argues, 'saying "now", however, is the discursive articulation of a *making-present* which temporalises itself in a unity with a retentive awaiting,' and 'the making present which interprets itself – in other words, that which has been interpreted and is addressed in the "now" - is what we call time.'[52] Ricoeur acknowledges that his argument for such a link between Heidegger and narrative may not, at first, be very clear but can be found, he argues, in recognising that, 'narrative configurations and the most elaborate forms of temporality corresponding to them share the same foundation of within-time-ness.'[53] Having established this link Ricoeur goes on to conclude his discussion of mimeis$_1$ by arguing that it is upon this pre-understanding that emplotment is constructed and so he moves on to consider mimesis$_2$.

Mimesis$_2$ is the act of configuration and is where the concept of emplotment or muthos is of key significance. As I mentioned above Ricoeur turns again to Aristotle to develop this concept. For Aristotle plot is not a static structure but an integrating process and it is in this sense that Ricoeur talks about emplotment being the 'synthesis of the heterogeneous.'[54] Such a synthesis takes place, according to Ricoeur, on a number of levels. First, there is the synthesis between events and incidents (which are multiple) and the story (which is unified and complete). Second, plot allows many heterogeneous components to be organised into a single story and thereby giving the plot a totality that encompasses both concordance and discordance or as Ricoeur likes to phrase it: discordant concordance or concordant discordance and summarises thus:

> Diverse mediations performed by the plot: between the manifold events
> and the temporal unity of the story recounted; between the disparate
> components of the action - intentions, causes and chance occurrences -

[52] Heidegger, p. 469 &p.460
[53] Ricoeur, 1984, p. 64
[54] Ricoeur, 1984, p. 66

and the sequence of the story; and finally, between pure succession and the unity of the temporal form, which, in extreme cases, can disrupt chronology to the point of abolishing it.[55]

This last point of Ricoeur's is key to his argument. Emplotment cannot be the mere organisation of events into a linearly temporal succession. Events must be related to each other in some sense by having a reason or purpose for them having occurred in that order. The difference then, for Ricoeur, between a narrative account and a mere impersonal description lies in the different understandings of events used by these models. Narrative events, for Ricoeur, have at their heart an inversion whereby contingency becomes necessity.[56] What was a mere occurrence, a surprise, an unexpected happening becomes an integral, necessary part of the story when understood after the fact and it is this that drives the story forward. Mimesis$_2$ can be seen then as the process by which all the elements of a plot are brought together. This process though implies the existence of a reader who must perform the work of reading the text in order to bring all the elements together and it is at this point that Mimesis$_3$ comes about.[57]

Mimesis$_3$ is the process of refiguration and describes the point at which the world of the text and the world of the reader intersect or, in other words, the point at which the text is applied to the real world.[58] Mimesis$_3$ then is the understanding we have after encountering the narrative and so we are returned to Ricoeur's hermeneutic circle: our understanding of the world enables us to understand the narrative which in turn allows us to understand the real world.[59] The importance of the temporal dimension of this argument is highlighted by Ricoeur when he argues that narrative follows 'the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the

[55] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 141
[56] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 142
[57] Ricoeur, 1984, p.71
[58] Ricoeur, 1984, p. 71
[59] Simms, p. 86

mediation of a configured time.'[60]

This threefold composition of narrative time is, as I mentioned earlier, tied into Ricoeur's phenomenological account of time but it is not a direct correlation but rather a mirror image. In narrative time our pre-understanding is reconfigured by Mimesis$_2$ into a new understanding while real life is 'the anticipation of the future mediated by the memory of the past.'[61] This is the hermeneutic circle between life and narrative but Ricoeur adds a further turn. He does so by explaining the role of time in both everyday life and mimesis and showing why it is that time and mimesis together equal narrative and furthermore why it is that this understanding of narrative is so fundamental to our understanding of human life and, crucially, our understanding of self identity.[62]

For Ricoeur the problem of personal identity is that it is the site of conflict between two uses of the concept of identity. These he classifies as identity as sameness, *idem*, and identity as selfhood, *ipse*. He proceeds to argue that it is when we begin to consider questions about permanence in time, so for example 'am I the same person I was five years ago?', that the confrontation between these two versions of identity becomes apparent and therefore a genuine problem.

At first permanence in time seems to be exclusively linked to the concept of *idem* identity however Ricoeur is also keen to ask:

> Is there a form of permanence in time which can be connected to the question "who?" inasmuch as it is irreducible to any question of "what?"? Is there a form of permanence in time that is a reply to the question, "Who am I?"[63]

In other words how can we speak in terms of identity through time with regards to

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[60] Ricoeur, 1992, p.54
[61] Simms, pp. 86-7
[62] Simms, p. 87
[63] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 118

our *ipse* identity? Ricoeur believes he can answer this question by exploring two models of permanence in and through time that are expressed first through the concept of character and second by the act of keeping one's word. Each idea however represents a different polar extreme: character expresses the complete and mutual overlapping of *ipse* and *idem* identities whereas in keeping one's word an extreme gap between our *ipse* and *idem* identities is opened up.[64] The role of narrative identity is to intervene in the construction of personal identity by acting as mediator between the poles of character (where *idem* and *ipse* coincide) and keeping one's word (where ipse and idem are opposed). In order to understand these ideas more fully it is necessary to understand what it is Ricoeur means by character and keeping one's word.

As I have already outlined, character, for Ricoeur, 'constitutes the limit point where the problematic of *ipse* becomes indiscernible from that of *idem*.[65] This is what character does; but what character *is* is a set of dispositions by which a person can be recognised as an individual and as ever with Ricoeur it is crucial to his argument to recognise the temporal dimensions of such dispositions. Therefore, if we think of dispositions as habits over time then they are not just acquired and kept the same for ever after but all the time new ones are in the process of being formed and existing ones are being altered and changed. In this way such habits or traits not only describe our character as it is now but also provide us with a history that is driving us forward into the future.

This idea that dispositions can become deeply embedded but yet open to change and revision can be further understood by Ricoeur's arguments on sedimentation and innovation, which he also applies to the idea of traditionality in the narrative genre:

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[64] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 118
[65] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 121

> The constitution of a tradition indeed depends on the interaction between two factors, innovation and sedimentation. It is to sedimentation that we ascribe the models that constitute, after the fact, the typology of emplotment which allows us to order the history of literary genres.[66]

So, it is because of sedimentation that we are able to talk of tragedy and comedy but at the same time Ricoeur is keen to remind us that these genres do not represent 'eternal essences.' Rather it is that their moment of innovation has been so deeply buried, so deeply sedimented that 'their genesis has been obliterated.'[67]

Of course the opposite pole to sedimentation, as Ricoeur acknowledges, is innovation and it is this that prevents every single work as being identified as a traditional narrative. Innovation, Ricoeur argues, allows the rules of narrative to change but that these rules change slowly 'under the pressure of innovation.' The image that always comes to mind when reading this passage is of the excruciatingly slow geological process that creates metamorphic rocks.

Innovation does however remain for Ricoeur a rule bound process because, he argues, imagination does not spring fully formed from nowhere but rather it remains tied in one fashion or another to the traditions out of which it grows. Even acts of deviance and rebellion are done so in relation to the works that are being challenged and so he argues that even contemporary novels that define themselves as anti-novels are created by breaking the rules of the novel. It is the rules themselves that are the 'object of new experimentation,' and so 'the possibility of deviance is included in the relation between sedimentation and innovation which constitutes tradition.'[68]

This language of sedimentation and innovation continues to be used by Ricoeur in relation to his discussion of self and in particular in terms of character habits and

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[66] Paul Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative', in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. D. Wood (London, Routledge, 1991), p. 24

[67] Ricoeur, 1991, p. 24

[68] Ricoeur, 1991, p. 25

traits. So for Ricoeur in the same way as happens with narrative modes the process of sedimentation means that the moment of innovation in our character is covered over, even to the point of abolishment and, 'it is this sedimentation which confers on character the sort of permanence in time that I am interpreting here as the overlapping of *ipse* by *idem*.'[69]

However these character dispositions, like imagination, do not come from nowhere and Ricoeur is clear on the fact that we are all fully embodied beings that come from a particular time and place and are the inheritors of a particular culture no matter how cosmopolitan we may become. So it is that he also considers the way in which the identity of an individual is also made up of those norms, values, ideals, models and identification with the heroes of a community *in* which the person recognises themselves. In so doing this demonstrates the ways in which we can place 'causes' above our own survival and so 'an element of loyalty is thus incorporated into character and makes it turn towards fidelity [and] hence toward maintaining the self.'[70]

It is at this point that I want to, for the moment, put to one side my discussion of Ricoeur's arguments about character to consider two points of argument. The first can be dealt with very briefly but the second will take some closer consideration. My first point therefore, is to make clear that although I stated in my introductory remarks about MacIntyre that I was not particularly concerned with his use of Aristotelian ethics it may be noted that Ricoeur's arguments about character may also be understood in such an Aristotelian manner. As Aristotle maintains in the *Nicomachean Ethics* character virtues, as opposed to intellectual virtues, are dispositions which remain or are a state (*hexis*) as opposed to a capacity or a

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[69] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 121
[70] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 121

feeling.[71] I do not dispute that this is the case but feel that it is possible to examine Ricoeur's thinking on character formation without introducing a specific argument for virtue ethics to my arguments.

The second argument I wish to consider is more complicated and concerns Ricoeur's pairing of ideology / utopia with those ideas of sedimentation / innovation considered above. Ricoeur develops his arguments concerning ideology and utopia from his conception of the social imaginary. The social imaginary, according to Ricoeur, is comprised of those stories that we tell ourselves, as societies, in order to explain ourselves not only to us but also to others.[72] It is in this way, Ricoeur argues, that narratives exceed the individual's imagination and extend themselves into the realm of a communal imaginary that is expressed through both ideological and utopian thought.[73]

While acknowledging how our ideas concerning ideology have developed in philosophical thought particularly through the works of Hegel and Marx into a concept that is largely used in a negative sense Ricoeur is keen to demonstrate that ideology, once stripped of any epistemological concerns, is capable of serving a symbolic function.[74] Instead ideology, for Ricoeur, can be understood as serving society's needs for self-representation and as 'an unsurpassable phenomenon of socio-historical existence.'[75] Ideology then is an indispensable part of the hermeneutic circle that our historically situated consciousness is obliged to operate. It follows then that our best response is not to try and fully negate ideology, which Ricoeur argues is an impossible task, but instead we need to develop a hermeneutic

[71] Christopher Shields, *Aristotle* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2007), p. 326
[72] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), p. 75
[73] Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1985)
[74] Kearney, p. 76
[75] Kearney, p. 83

imagination capable of discrimination.[76]

So, as always with Ricoeur, it comes down to understanding the hermeneutic circle that these ideas are operating within. In this instance it means recognising that while ideology forms one half, the other half of this circle, for Ricoeur, is utopian thought. Utopian thought he suggests is the future orientated dimension of our social imaginary, it is that horizon of aspirations that is opened up through the symbolic so that we can, as a society, imagine a better world. Ricoeur acknowledges that not all utopian conceptions are libratory and that historically they have been used and abused by those who would rule us but is keen to emphasis the critical potential of utopian thought:

> Every society possesses...a socio-political *imaginaire* – that is, an ensemble of symbolic discourses that can function as a rupture or a re-affirmation. As reaffirmation, the *imaginaire* operates as an 'ideology' which can positively repeat and represent the founding discourse of a society...thus preserving its sense of identity. After all, cultures create themselves by telling stories of their past. The danger is, of course, that this reaffirmation can be perverted, usually by monopolistic elites, into a mystificatory discourse which serves to uncritically vindicate or justify the established political powers. In such instances, the symbols of the community become fixed and fetishized; they serve as lies. Over against this, there exists the *imaginaire* of rupture, a discourse of 'utopia' which remains critical of the powers that be out of fidelity to an 'elsewhere,' to a society that is not-yet.[77]

It is in this language of reaffirmation and rupture that we can see the link in Ricoeur's thinking between ideology / utopia and sedimentation / innovation. Furthermore, his ideas about our personal and social imagination have an important role to play when I come to consider our potential for autonomy in my next chapter.

Returning now to Ricoeur's arguments about character we can see therefore that his arguments allow character to operate in such a way as to allow *ipse* to announce

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[76] Kearney, p.83
[77] Paul Ricoeur, 'The Creativity of Language', in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton*, ed. R. Kearney (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 29- 30

itself as *idem* because our character dispositions give us a stability which in turn assures sameness and continuity across and through change. In other words it gives us permanence through time. So, as Ricoeur argues, character is the 'what' of the 'who' though he maintains that this overlap is not such that *idem* and *ipse* become indistinguishable. Indeed the radical difference between the two is highlighted by the other model of permanence through time mentioned earlier, that of keeping one's word. According to Ricoeur keeping ones word expresses a self constancy that is only capable of being expressed within the dimension of 'who?' rather than within the realm of something general.[78] This is because 'keeping one's promise does indeed appear to stand as a challenge to time, a denial of change: even if my desire were to change, even if I were to change my opinion or inclination, "I will hold firm."'[79]

It is this ethical justification with its own set of temporal implications (permanence through time) that stands in opposition to the permanence of character as I have just outlined. Whereas *ipse* and *idem* identities seem to coincide within the realm of character, the permanence in time suggested by the act of keeping one's word drives them apart. For Ricoeur it is in this space between character and keeping one's word that narrative identity comes to the fore as it oscillates between these two extremes.[80] Therefore, for Ricoeur, the genuine nature of our narrative identities is disclosed only through the dialectic of selfhood and sameness and indeed, he goes on to argue, it is this dialectic that represents the major contribution of narrative theory to the constitution of the self.[81] This being the case it is this theory of narrative identity that I shall now examine in greater depth.

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[78] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 123
[79] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 124
[80] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 124
[81] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 140

According to Ricoeur, and this where the argument begins to turn full circle, the identity of the character in a narrative is constructed through a connection with that of the plot. The key move in Ricoeur's theory comes when we realise that character is itself a narrative category and 'its role in narrative involves the same narrative understanding as the plot itself,' in other words, characters are themselves plots. This correlation, as Ricoeur himself acknowledges, is nothing new and is developed by Aristotle in his *Poetics* and so, 'it is in the story recounted, with its qualities of unity, internal structure and completeness conferred through emplotment, that the character preserves an identity correlative to that of the story itself.'[82]

There are then, according to Ricoeur, the same processes at work in our characters as there are in a narrative plot. So, in the same way that emplotment is to be understood as the 'synthesis of the heterogeneous' and involving discordant concordance so too individuals can assert their character and their *ipse* identity in a similar manner. In terms of concordance an individual draws their singularity from the unity of their life when it is considered as a temporal totality which is in itself singular and distinguished from all other lives. However this temporal unity and the concordance of our character is threatened, as it is in narratives, by discordance in the shape of unforeseen and indeed unforeseeable events that can threaten our habits and may require us to respond in new and imaginative ways. Nevertheless, a concordant discordance is achieved when the contingency of these events is transfigured into the history of a life which in turn provides us with the identity of the character. In other words, Ricoeur argues, chance is transmuted into fate.[83] While acknowledging that Ricoeur's argument here again owes much to Heidegger's thought and his conception of fate or *Schicksal,* I think the core idea to take away is that once we

[82] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 143
[83] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 147

have experienced an unexpected event in our lives we incorporate it into our narrative understanding in such a way that it could not have happened any other way. What was a contingent event becomes a necessary one. Therefore, for Ricoeur, a person is not an entity distinct from their experiences, indeed, he is arguing for quite the opposite, that in fact narrative constructs the identity of our character and so therefore we have a narrative identity.

Such an account of narrative identity is, I feel, highly persuasive. Furthermore I agree with Lois McNay when she argues that the way in which such a narrative account emphasises the temporality of existence:

> Gives depth to the rather one-dimensional way in which the idea of the contingency of identity has been thematised in poststructural thought. It is the lack of temporal depth in many social constructionist accounts of identity that leaves them unable to mediate between fixity versus change which is one of the oppositions generated by the debate on essentialism.[84]

While I am convinced of the merits of adopting such an account of identity this is not to suggest that there are not however, a number of concerns that must be raised and addressed before moving on to consider how such a narrative self can also be an autonomous self.

4. Criticisms of Narrative Identity

In considering those possible criticisms of narrative theory I shall be looking at two articles in particular. The first of these is an article from John Christman and the second is Galen Strawson's piece 'Against Narrativity'. In 'Narrative Unity as a Condition of Personhood' John Christman criticises the way in which the condition of narrativity has been used by writers such as MacIntyre and Ricoeur as the necessary condition of personal identity. He does this by examining in some detail three kinds of relations that he argues must hold between events, or the reporting of

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[84] Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000), p. 116

events, in order to count as a narrative. These relations are, according to Christman: causal connectivity, teleological or functional connectivity and thematic connectivity.[85]

Causal narrative connections, Christman argues, suggest that sequences of events unfold in such a way to indicate a causal ordering so that any given event can be explained only through reference to earlier occurrences. The problem for Christman is that not all events in a person's life follow this pattern, things happen unexpectedly, accidently and in a seemingly random fashion and while these experiences can then be incorporated into a story or narrative they do not occur as a result of an already pre-existing causal chain in that individual's life. So for Christman, 'many of the experiences and events that constitute a person's life are accidental and uncaused by an ongoing pattern of events begun at the person's birth therefore not all events in a narrative form a complete causal chain.'[86]

Furthermore, Christman contends, that even if narrative structures did contain a causal condition that this would still not characterise a 'necessary condition for the unity of the self' by arguing that there can be many aspects of a person's life that can proceed independently of each other that do not require a narrative structure to bring them together but simply require the existence of the same physical subject at the centre of them.[87] Christman's final criticism of causal connectivity as a condition of narrativity is that it is far too inclusive and he points to the fact that in our day to day lives we are the subjects of hundreds of life events. So for example today I have, amongst other things, wished my partner a 'Happy Birthday' and watched him open his presents, made packed lunches, tracked down school uniforms, gone on school

[85] John Christman, 'Narrative Unity as a Condition of Personhood', in *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 35 No. 4, (2004), 695-713 (p. 701)
[86] Christman, 2004, p. 702
[87] Christman, 2004, p. 702

runs, caught the train and the bus to University, responded to emails, surfed the web, drank tea and finally settled down to writing some philosophy! As Christman points out most of these life events are trivial and will be quickly forgotten. Self conception on the other hand, he argues, 'involves reflection on those events that seem *significant* to us' and so 'at no time will self-conceptions include the limitless details of my entire causal nexus,' and therefore, 'Self-interpretative activity, which forms the core of the self in narrative theories, is selective and partial, leaving out of account most of the causal sequences in which we figure.'[88]

This seems at first a fair description of how most of us remember our lives. Of all my activities today I am most likely to forget the making of packed lunches and the hunting down of odd school socks but the celebration of my partner's birthday and the writing of this chapter are likely to remain as clear events in my memory. This would seem to be a clear description of Ricoeur's conception of lived or phenomenological time, that there are highlight moments in our lives that structure our narratives. On this basis Christman concludes that the narrativity of identity cannot be comprised of a single, causally connected chain of events. Narrative by extension then is not characterised by a causal structure.

However while I do not disagree that there are these stand out moments that function as key narrative hooks in helping to construct a person's sense of identity I am not so sure that we should be so quick to dismiss the importance of our day to day activities in underpinning our narratives and therefore our identities. True, I may not be able to recall with crystal clear clarity every time I have got up during the night over the years to feed and take care of my children when they were babies and small children but doing so (and having done so) repeatedly has formed a large part of my self-

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[88] Christman, 2004, p. 703

understanding as a mother and therefore my (narrative) identity. That this is the case I do not think would come as any great surprise to the theorists that I have already discussed.

Taking Christman's arguments point by point I would suggest that the fact that events occur by chance or accident is fully acknowledged by Ricoeur. Christman's criticism is answered when Ricoeur argues that by being incorporated into the narrative structure such seemingly random happenings in our lives are transmuted into fate and come to be understood so that things could not have happened otherwise. Without this incorporation into the narrative structure through the use of *muthos* or emplotment these events would remain, as Ricoeur argues, a mere sequence of unrelated experiences and we would not be able to fully understand them. This is Ricoeur's 'synthesis of the heterogeneous' and his ideas related to discordant concordance. It would also appear to me that Christman is not paying sufficient attention to the fact that both MacIntyre and Ricoeur emphasise how strongly our individual narratives are intertwined and enmeshed with the narratives of others so that the explanation of events and actions can only happen and be made intelligible within such a context.

Finally, Christman's concern that narrative ignores those elements of our day to day lives that are trivial and mundane is again not one that I feel would overly worry narrative theorists. As Joseph Dunne argues:

> It will never be the case, of course that everything that transpires in our lives will be faithfully recorded in our narratives; full self transparency is angelic rather than human and, in any case, every story is edited.[89]

Edited, yes, but I would also argue that it is the minutiae of life that while not recalled in detail provides the background to our narrative. Again this is not an idea

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[89] Dunne, p. 153

that Ricoeur ignores, this is sedimentation. You do not become a mother simply by remembering the birth of your children, similarly you do not become a teacher by dint of the fact that you can remember passing exams and graduating. Therefore, I do not believe that Christman's arguments that narrativity theories fail to demonstrate that the unity of the self is to be found through chains of causal connectivity is a problem for such theorists.

After considering causal connectivity Christman then moves on to discuss ideas of teleological connectivity within narrative. As I discussed earlier this is an idea that is central to MacIntyre's theory of narrative identity so that events are given meaning through their reference to some ultimate goal or aim. Clearly in MacIntyre's case this teleology is most apparent in his arguments about human life being best understood as a quest for the good.

Christman identifies two key problems with such a condition for narrative. First, it does not seem clear that all narratives do have to have any kind of teleology, e.g. the narratives of soap operas; and second, it seems highly unlikely that the lives of (most) human beings exhibit this tendency of working towards a single clear aim either.[90] Christman allows that it is possible to argue for human lives containing multiple purposes, ends or goals but worries that 'unless it is specified *how many* such goals can be pursued, the condition of narrativity, so construed, will be trivially met by all individuals, no matter what level of unity or coherence their lives manifest.'[91] Christman's concern is that without a clear method of appraisal it is unclear how to separate those unified (narrative) sequences from the dissociative ones or, in other words, selves from non-selves.

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[90] Christman, 2004, p. 704
[91] Christman, 2004, p. 704

This is a criticism that must be answered in the light of the fact that I am using the concept of the narrative self in order to address the problem of extreme fragmentation and dissociation. I am not sure that Christman's insistence that only a certain, definitive number of goals can be held by a unified self is correct. I am sympathetic to the idea that having too many goals could be detrimental to a cohesive sense of self but it is also a fact that we all know people in our day to day lives who seem able and competent at pursuing any number of goals. It is true there are not too many Renaissance men, or women for that matter, about but they can and do exist. This argument points towards understanding our ability to construct a narrative identity as being fluid and not as something that is achieved once and once only and then simply maintained. This is an idea that I will return to at the end of this chapter.

Also as Dunne argues, 'to speak of the unity of a life is by no means to imply that a life is unified by an overarching design or master project; it is , rather, to invoke the *whole* of a life, however fragmented and dislocated this whole may be.'[92] I think what can be taken from Dunne here is the very reason why I originally turned to the idea of narrative identity: our lives are fragmented and intersectional, composed from many competing and not always complimentary identity sources but yet we still manage to maintain a feeling of selfhood, a sense of who we are. The self is not unitary but is made cohesive and coherent through the interweaving of these disparate elements. This is, in part, what Ricoeur means by discordant concordance. So again, I do not feel that Christman's argument that narrative theorists cannot demonstrate a teleological connectivity within narrative structures constitutes a fatal blow.

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[92] Dunne, p. 150

Finally, Christman turns to consider the possibility of thematic connectivity within narrative structures. Christman suggests that this is the most plausible characterisation of narratives because it is the most flexible. Adopting such an understanding may not make it possible to demonstrate that narratives possess a linear causal story line but it does allow them to be made meaningful by appeal to an overall thematic structure.[93] Christman goes on to characterise this as a hermeneutic account of narrative in so far as 'thematic unity is possible whenever there is an interpreter who is able to look upon the event sequences and impose (or find) common symbolic elements suggestive of a unifying idea.'[94]

If what is meant by thematic unity, Christman continues, is that we are able to identify a single idea through which a life can be understood then this too fails as a means of identifying and picking out selves.[95] Lives, he argues, are more generally categorised by multiple themes. This is an assertion which in line with all my previous arguments I am happy to accept.

Having established this argument Christman then turns his attention to the role of interpreter and suggests that:

> If one grants that the individual in question is a conscious reflecting interpreter of experiences, then thematic unity of this sort will be achieved whenever the interpreting subject can make minimal sense of her experiences ...The further insistence that the experiences of which she is a subject be narrative in form adds nothing to the analysis.'[96]

This is the crux of Christman's argument, not that we do not think in terms of narrative or that it is without value in terms of personal development but that when the idea is 'unpacked' we see that it is being held up by a deeper condition lying underneath. Therefore, he concludes it is not narrative but rather 'what is truly

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[93] Christman, 2004, p. 705
[94] Christman, 2004, p. 705
[95] Christman, 2004, p. 706
[96] Christman, 2004, p. 706

necessary for a unified life in these theories is the capacity for reflection on events...in a spirit that attempts to render the events coherent within the categories of meaning available to the subject.'[97]

Ultimately then Christman concludes that what his arguments demonstrate is the need to refocus our attentions on the process of self-reflective meaning making rather than on its structure and organisation.[98] However, I think that Chrisman has misunderstood Ricoeur's analysis of narrative at a fundamental level. Narrative for Ricoeur *is* the privileged means of self reflective meaning making.

As discussed earlier there is a strong link, for Ricoeur, between narrative, human action and meaning so that they form a healthy hermeneutic circle and with each turn of this circle our understanding of is increased. So as McNay argues:

> The narrative interpretation of experience points to the symbolic nature of human action: if human action can be narrated, it is because it is inherently symbolic in nature...Action is only readable because it is symbolic. Comprehension of human action is not only dependent on familiarity with its symbolic mediation, but also with the temporal structures that evoke narration.

Central to understanding the role of narrative in identity formation in Ricoeur's thought therefore is not to suppose that there is still in some way a core, transcendental self that lies behind and constructs the narrative like a puppet master. This is not the case at all but rather, as McNay argues the self, for Ricoeur, 'is historical *ab initio.* [99] This is a point also picked up and argued for by Dunne when he suggests that the relationship between narrative and self reflective meaning making is fundamental because this understanding:

> Does not lie alongside our living but is rather absorbed by and integrated into [it]. It is not that we have a self anyhow and that there is now an added understanding of it which we happen to have acquired. Rather, the

[97] Christman, 2004, p. 706-7
[98] Christman, p. 709
[99] McNay, p. 91

new understanding ...is constitutive of us, is what we *are*.[100]

So, it should now be clearer as to why I think Christman is mistaken. It is not that narrative is underpinned by a self-reflective meaning making process rather it is narrative that allows us to provide actions and life with meaning and as Ricoeur argues, 'Self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self in turn, finds in the narrative...a privileged form of mediation.'[101] Narrative then does not just provide structure and organisation to the self it is also the means by which we have an identity or sense of self and also how we come to understand that self.

Having defended the narrative thesis against Christman's arguments I will now move on to consider those arguments developed against such a position by Galen Strawson. Strawson begins his article 'Against Narrativity' by suggesting that, 'it's just not true that there is only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time. There are deeply non-Narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-Narrative.'[102] He argues that such non-narrative people are Episodic individuals who experience their identity states as discontinuous as opposed to Diachronic individuals who, he argues, experience their identity as continuous. Furthermore, Strawson places himself firmly in the Episodic camp arguing:

> I have a past, like any other human being, and I know perfectly well that I have a past. I have a respectable amount of factual knowledge about it, and I also remember some of my past experiences 'from the inside', as philosophers say. And yet I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.[103]

However, there are a number of interesting points of tension within Strawson's own paper that suggest that he may not be quite as Episodic as he would like to maintain.

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[100] Dunne, p. 152
[101] Ricoeur, 1992, p. 114
[102] Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', *Ratio*, 17 (2004), 428 -52, (p. 429)
[103] Strawson, p. 433

As Paul John Eakin argues Strawson wants to argue for a sense of discontinuous identity but does not wish to push it as far as a position of pathological dissociation.[104] Eakin continues by pointing to various points in Strawson's account when his arguments start to suggest that all Episodic individuals, such as himself, actually do possess a diachronic understanding of themselves after all, '*there's a clear sense in which every human life is a developmental unity – a historical-characteral developmental unity as well as a biological one.* '[105]

Furthermore Eakin suggests that not only is it that Episodic individuals display Diachronic understandings of identity but that the reverse is also true and all Diachronic individuals are Episodic. Strawson bases his position on the argument that it is not possible to re-experience or re-inhabit earlier identity states and Eakin supports this position but not just for Episodic individuals. Eakin argues that there is both psychological and neurological support for Strawson's argument, 'consciousness is not a neutral medium in which memories can be replayed and the past repeated intact. While we may have the sensation that we are capable of reliving the past...received opinion in brain studies offers no support for belief in invariant memory.'[106] Therefore, he argues, we are all Episodic.

To separate us, as individuals, into either Episodic or Diachronic individuals is, I would argue, an unnecessary and naïve move by Strawson. From Eakin's analysis it is clear to see that all individuals are both Episodic and Diachronic, we have a sense of possessing both continuous and discontinuous identities, even Strawson. This I would suggest leads the argument straight back to Ricoeur's analysis of identity. It would seem to me that Strawson's schema of Episodic (discontinuous) and

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[104] Paul John Eakin, ' Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism: A Response to Galen Strawson and James Phelan', *Narrative*, Vol. 14 No. 2 (2006), 180-7, (p.183)
[105] Strawson, p. 440, italics original
[106] Eakin, p. 182

Diachronic (continuous) identities are closely allied to Ricoeur's conceptions of *idem* and *ipse* identities. However Strawson wants to insist that we are either one or the other and fails to recognise, as Ricoeur does, that as human beings we possess and use both senses of identity, *idem* and *ipse*, continuous and discontinuous. And as Ricoeur argues it is in the mediation between these two poles that narrative identity operates. Contra Strawson, there are therefore no individuals who cannot access narrative understandings of their identity.

Strawson however is not just concerned with the psychological basis of narrative identity but also engages with it as an ethical theory. Here his targets are theorists such as Taylor, MacIntyre and Ricoeur who wish to argue that narrative understanding is, in some sense, necessary to human life e.g. MacIntyre's analysis of the quest. Strawson however argues that such an approach:

> Express[es] an ideal of self-control and self-awareness in human life that is mistaken and potentially pernicious. The aspiration to explicit Narrative self-articulation is natural for some...but in others it is highly unnatural and ruinous. My guess is that it almost always does more harm than good – that the Narrative tendency to look for a story or narrative coherence in one's life is, in general, a gross hindrance to self-understanding: to a just, general, practically real sense, implicit or explicit, of one's nature.[107]

I think it starts to become clear in this paragraph the precise nature of my disagreement with Strawson's position! First it becomes apparent in the last sentence that Strawson is operating with a concept of 'the self' that I have spent more than some time discounting. Such an approach is also apparent when he talks earlier in his article about how Narrative involves putting some construction on one's life. As already established earlier in this chapter there is no self behind the narrative that is in some sense controlling its construction. Furthermore, it would appear that Strawson, in the same manner as Christman, fails to understand that for Ricoeur

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[107] Strawson, p. 447

narrative understanding *is* self-understanding.

I would also strongly contest his claim that narrative understanding does more harm than good. Strawson argues at the beginning of his paper that 'if Episodics are moved to respond by casting aspersions on the Diachronic life – finding it somehow macerated or clogged, say, or excessively self-concerned, inauthentically second-order – they too will be mistaken if they think it an essentially inferior form of human life.'[108] Unfortunately this spirit of tolerance does not last long and before long Strawson is arguing that 'supporters of the ethical Narrativity thesis are really just talking about themselves...But even if it is true for them it is not true for other types of ethical personality...My own conviction is that *the best lives almost never involve this kind of self-telling.*'[109] Furthermore, Strawson's position is fundamentally inconsistent, he presents himself and his experiences as typically Episodic, 'I'll use myself as an example,' and in doing so does exactly what he is accusing narrative theorists of when they:

> generalise from their own case with that special, fabulously misplaced confidence that people feel when, considering elements of their own experience that are existentially fundamental for them, they take it that they must also be fundamental for everyone else.[110]

5. Conclusion

In conclusion and having considered a number of arguments against such a position I believe the arguments considered in this chapter have demonstrated that Ricoeur's account of narrative identity is strong enough to answer those critics I have considered here. Therefore on this basis I believe that it is possible to give an account of the self that is coherent and decentred but not radically fragmented based on such a narrative account of identity. As McNay argues, the idea of identity having a narrative structure supplements the poststructuralist dispersion of the subject while

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[108] Strawson, p. 431
[109] Strawson, p. 437, my emphasis
[110] Strawson, pp. 433 &439

still allowing that our narrative coherence does not emerge from an unchanging core within the self but rather develops as an attempt to make sense of our temporal existence.[111] Having established this I now want to begin to make the links between this understanding of identity and the concept of autonomy.

[111] McNay, pp. 115-6

Chapter 5: Narrative Identity and Autonomy Competency

Before beginning to develop the main theme of this final chapter it will be worthwhile briefly reviewing how my arguments have developed so far. My primary concern in Chapter Two was with those varied critiques of the concept of autonomy that have grown out of feminist thinking over recent years. One such critique in particular, and one that has provoked intense debate is the poststructuralist critique of the subject and it was this area of enquiry that formed the basis of my third chapter. This critique carries with it a concomitant implication that if there is no such thing as the self then there can be no such thing as autonomy. Autonomy therefore, according to this school of thought, can only be understood as a conceit of Enlightenment thought. The purpose of my last chapter was to demonstrate that in adopting a theory of narrative identity it is possible to develop an account of the self that is sensitive to some of the concerns of poststructuralist thought but which avoids its worst excesses. Having established this account of a coherent narrative self I will now move on to consider what account of autonomy is supported by this understanding of identity.

1. McNay and Ricoeur

As my arguments and analysis in the previous chapter made clear Ricoeur argues for an understanding of narrative identity that is capable of actively accommodating difference. Indeed it could be argued that, for Ricoeur, such an accommodation of difference is a necessary requirement for our subjectivity. This accommodation is achieved through the process of emplotment and concordant discordance that bring together, 'the concordance of the ongoing plot and the discordance of the peripeteia, such as the changes in fortune, reversals, upheavals, unexpected events and so

forth.'[1]

It is, however, of crucial importance to recognise that for Ricoeur this accommodation of difference is an ongoing process within our identities and is not an end result or final outcome.[2] Again the point has to be made that narrative identities are not fixed and immutable but possess, as Lois McNay contends, 'dynamic unity through time' and as a result of this characteristic she argues that Ricoeur's work should lead to us to realise that:

> Narrative self-formation is never complete or fully coherent. [And] in order to draw out a more active conception of agency, it is sufficient to make the... case that individuals have the potential to respond in a non-defensive and occasionally creative fashion to complexity and contradiction regardless of whether these differences are effectively reconciled or not.[3]

It is the last sentence of this quote that is my main concern at the beginning of this chapter. How can individuals who are understood to have a narrative identity, which does not require the resolution of all moments of difference, also be understood to be autonomous? In order to answer this question I shall be drawing extensively on McNay's analysis of Ricoeur and once I have established that it is possible for narrative subjects to be (potentially) autonomous I shall then turn to an examination of Ricoeur's arguments concerning autonomy and its relation to, as he terms it, vulnerability.

In developing an account of Ricoeur that points to the possibility of autonomous action and agency McNay correctly emphasises his assertion that the identical and non-identical are inextricable and intrinsic to any process of self-formation. Furthermore, and of importance to my thesis, McNay suggests that it is the

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[1] Paul Ricoeur, 'Autonomy and Vulnerability', in *Reflections on the Just*, trans. D. Pellauer (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 79
[2] Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000), p. 102
[3] McNay, pp. 74 & 102

recognition of this point that suggests renewed grounds for feminists to re-engage with the concept of autonomy.[4] McNay categorises these as renewed grounds and as a re-engagement because she also identifies a strong trend in feminist writing to disconnect such moments of identification and non-identification. This tendency in feminist thought then manifests itself in those 'dualisms of the normal and the excluded, the central and the marginal that tacitly operate in work on subject formation.'[5] Furthermore, according to McNay, this separation is evident in the opposition between a politics of identity and a politics of re-signification. The former 'cannot afford to acknowledge the exclusions upon which it is dependent' because it wishes to reaffirm the coherence of the self while the latter 'risks the 'incoherence of identity' through an 'unravelling of the symbolic.'[6]

So these renewed grounds for feminist engagements with autonomy result, according to McNay, from Ricoeur's insistence on the 'necessary intertwinement of the moments of identification and distantiation,' which demonstrate that, 'the capacity for autonomous thought and action is a potential immanent to the process of subject formation rather than being based on a denial of the embedded and embodied condition.'[7] Therefore, the feminist concerns that autonomy is an inherently rationalistic and radically individualistic concept that were raised back in Chapter Two is addressed and answered through the adoption of such a Ricoeurian understanding of agency.

However, by treading this middle path Ricoeur's philosophy also allows feminist thought to operate at an abstract theoretical level which too can be the target of feminist criticism. The concern that McNay is identifying here are those feminist

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[4] McNay, p. 103
[5] McNay, p. 103
[6] McNay, pp. 103-4
[7] McNay, p. 105

ideas that suggest that abstract concepts, like autonomy, are based on a denial of our connection to the other and on a more generalised dismissal of the embodied condition.[8] A good example of this form of feminist thought is the ethic of care critique which I discussed in Chapter Two that argues that mainstream philosophical thought does not recognise the importance of our relations of dependence and interconnection. The problem that arises from such a rejection of abstract thought, McNay suggests, is that:

> If the ability to act implies some form of transcendence from immediate material circumstances, then an unequivocal insistence on the embeddedness of the subject undermines ways in which to think of agency with respect to transformations in gender norms.[9]

So, as I have already argued, Ricoeur's thought appears to allow us to steer a course through recognising our embedded nature and yet not denying the importance of abstract theoretical thought.

Returning to the potential for autonomy; McNay argues that the basis for this lies in the intertwinement of those moments of identification and non-identification or distantiation. In trying to explain the importance of distantiation to self understanding in Ricoeur's theory of agency it is necessary to go back to those arguments concerning ideology and utopia that I discussed in the last chapter.

As I have already argued Ricoeur suggests that ideology and utopia form a hermeneutic circle with ideology representing the historically situated nature of our consciousness while utopian thinking represents our ability to imagine a better future. A further crucial function of this hermeneutic circle is critical distantiation, so, as Kearney argues:

> Critical distance...is itself integral to the hermeneutic circle. This is so because the gap between the present (which is real) and the future and

[8] McNay, p. 104
[9] McNay, p. 104

the past (which are often ideal) provides the possibility of historical distantiation. Historical distancing implies self-distancing, a distancing of the subject from itself, which allows for a critical self-imagining.[10]

Kearney then goes on to argue that for Ricoeur this dialectic between belonging and distancing allows for a transition from prejudice to critical self-appraisal.[11] Furthermore, this potential for autonomy, according to McNay, is realised in Ricoeur's work as a result of his analysis of mimesis as a threefold process, the structure of which I also discussed in some detail in the last chapter. The process of pre-figuration ($mimesis_1$), configuration ($mimesis_2$) and re-figuration ($mimesis_3$) as described by Ricoeur allows, she argues, for the development of an account of active self interpretation rather than the radical separation of those moments of identity and dissidence. Therefore McNay suggests that it is as a result of the tension generated between such moments of distantiation and identification that ultimately allows for our potential for autonomous agency and action or, indeed, critique.[12]

That this argument can be made as a result of Ricoeur's thought goes some way, McNay believes, to answering the problem faced by Foucault's work wherein the terms 'normative' and 'normalisation' become completely conflated. The conflation of these terms means that Foucault has difficulties in explaining the active efforts of individuals to adopt normative behaviours but an explanation is needed because such efforts are necessary and required for the reproduction of even the most established societal norms.[13] Rather McNay suggests that:

> Conformity to norms cannot simply be inferred from the existence of norms themselves; it may often be the case that the actor had to devise a new and unfamiliar path of action. It is this capacity for independent and even unexpected action inherent to the most mundane and normatively orientated behaviour that Ricoeur invokes with his notion of the inevitable grounding of the moment of mimetic identification and

[10] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2004), p. 89
[11] Kearney, p. 89
[12] McNay, p. 109
[13] McNay, p. 109

distantiation.[14]

Therefore, what McNay's analysis of Ricoeur provides us with is a way to see how it is possible to understand an agent, with a narrative identity, as possessing the capacity to be autonomous. So far however these arguments remain a highly abstract and theoretical account of a potential capacity. Having established this basis though allows me now to develop an account of how this potentiality for critique or autonomy can be realised in our day to day lives and I shall begin to do so by returning to Ricoeur.

2. Autonomy, Vulnerability and Narrative

In beginning to 'flesh out' what this potential for autonomy means I will begin by examining those arguments that Ricoeur himself proposes in his article 'Autonomy and Vulnerability.' Ricoeur opens this article by arguing that autonomy forms one half of a paradoxical relation with, as he calls it, vulnerability or fragility.

The relation between these two states, he argues is not the same as the relationship between freedom and determinism, they are not simple antimonies, because they are 'opposed to each other in the same universe of thought.' Therefore they form a paradox because 'it is the same human being who is both of these things from a different point of view,' and again, 'the autonomy in question is that of a fragile, vulnerable being.'[15]

Ricoeur illustrates his point by arguing that human beings, at the most basic level, possess certain capacities or potentialities. These capacities include, he argues, the ability to speak, to act on the course of things, to influence other protagonists, the ability to gather one's own life into an intelligent and acceptable narrative and, finally, we have the capacity to understand ourselves as being the actual author of

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[14] McNay, p. 109
[15] Ricoeur, 2007, p. 73

our own acts.[16] It would also seem from the discussion of McNay's analysis above

that another one of these potentialities that we possess is our capacity to be

autonomous.

However, while we may be 'capable' human beings we are also vulnerable and

Ricoeur describes the correlative incapacities of our fragility thus:

> If the basis of autonomy can be described in terms of the vocabulary of
> ability, it is in that of inability or a lesser ability that human fragility first
> expresses itself. It is first as a speaking subject that our mastery appears
> to be threatened...What immediately comes to mind is not so much a
> natural given as a perverse cultural effect, once the inability to speak
> well results in effectively being expelled from the sphere of discourse.
> In this regard, one of the first forms of the equality of opportunity has to
> do with equality on the plane of being able to speak, explain, argue,
> discuss.[17]

These ideas of capabilities, capacities and abilities with regards to the concept of

autonomy are ones that I shall return to shortly but first I want to continue examining

Ricoeur's arguments.

As I have just argued the idea of capacities and incapacities is, according to Ricoeur,

the most elementary form of the autonomy–fragility paradox but he also argues that

our narrative identities are closely tied to this dualism. First, he suggests that

narrative coherence is a prerequisite for autonomy because:

> The handling of one's own life, as a possibly coherent narrative,
> represents a high level of competence that has to be taken as one of the
> major components of the autonomy of a subject [of rights]. In this
> respect, one can speak of education to narrative coherence, of education
> to narrative identity. One can learn to tell the same story otherwise, learn
> to let it be told by others than oneself, learn to submit the narrative of
> one's life to the critique of documentary history.... We therefore say that
> to be autonomous one must be a subject capable of leading one's life in
> accord with the idea of narrative coherence.[18]

As McCarthy notes, it would appear here that Ricoeur has a very specific role for the

narrative self to play and that is to act as the source of our moral capacities

[16] Ricoeur, 2007, p. 75
[17] Ricoeur, 2007, p. 76
[18] Ricoeur, 2007, p. 80

including, in this instance, autonomy.[19] McCarthy proceeds to raise the concern that Ricoeur's arguments for such an educated narrative self are describing a normative ideal rather than the shared condition of all individuals because 'not all human lives follow the trajectory of the kind that Ricoeur has in mind.'[20]

This is the first of two problems that McCarthy attributes to Ricoeur's account. Essentially she is agreeing with Margaret Walker's argument when Walker suggests:

> There is just no plausible move in general from making sense of an action in some narrative context to needing to see it against the backcloth of an entire life. It is also because I find the more ambitious claims about the inclusiveness and centrality of plans, projects, and plots questionable as descriptions of actual people's actual lives, where these nonetheless seem decent, good or admirable.[21]

Therefore, McCarthy is suggesting that Ricoeur's understanding of narrative identity cannot account for the fragmented and 'piece meal' nature of people's lives. Her second objection to Ricoeur's argument follows from her concern that he does not pay enough attention to the effects of power relations on our narrative self-understandings.

Clearly she is mistaken about her first claim, as I have been arguing; narrative identity is the means by which the disparate and intersectional aspects of our identities are given a degree of unity and coherence. Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity accounts very well for the 'piece meal' nature of people's lives; this is why he argues for the idea of discordant concordance. McCarthy's second argument however, I believe, deserves closer attention.

The criticism that Ricoeur does not allow for the effects of power relations is not limited to McCarthy's writing but is a point also made by McNay who suggests that he does not pay close enough attention to the ideological and institutional context in

[19] Joan McCarthy, *Dennet and Ricoeur on the Narrative Self* (New York, Humanity Books, 2007), p. 230
[20] McCarthy, p. 230
[21] Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings* (London, Routledge, 1998), p. 148

which narrative forms operate.[22] McCarthy suggests that this omission is the result of Ricoeur wishing to be able to deliver a particular account of (autonomous) moral agency and so this leads him to, 'focus on those aspects of literature and psychoanalysis that lend support to his claims that the self can be stabilised through narrative coherence, and that one should ignore those aspects of ... discourse that undermine that very stability.'[23]

While this may be a valid criticism of Ricoeur's earlier works I think there is evidence that he was aware of these issues and had begun to address them in some of his later publications and which appears to be a point that is conceded by McCarthy in later arguments.[24] So it is in 'Autonomy and Vulnerability,' that Ricoeur argues that:

> The incapacities that humans inflict upon one another, on the occasion of multiple interactions, get added to those brought about by illness, old age, and infirmities, in short by the way the world is. They imply a specific form of power, a power-over that consists in an initial dissymmetric relation between the agent and the receiver of the agent's action. In turn, this dissymmetry opens the way to all the forms of intimidation....Here we need to take into consideration the kinds of unequal distribution of the ability to act, especially those that result from hierarchies of command and authority in societies...People do not simply lack power; they are deprived of it.[25]

So it would appear that Ricoeur is aware of the social context and the power relations that form and influence our ability, our capacity, to be autonomous.

Furthermore, Ricoeur also acknowledges that there are instances whereby it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to narrate ourselves, ' [T]he employment of this capacity [to narrate] does not always happen smoothly, as is indicated by the inability of many survivors to bring their wounded memories to verbal expression in narrative...'

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[22] McNay, p. 113
[23] McCarthy, p. 232
[24] McCarthy, p. 239
[25] Ricoeur, 2007, p. 77

[26] Here Ricoeur gives an example of the survivors of concentration camps but Susan Brison in her article 'Outliving Oneself' widens this to include the survivors of many different types of trauma including rape and soldiers who suffer post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of being in combat.[27] Brison, a survivor of rape herself, writes vividly about how the effects of her ordeal affected her ability to understand who she was and who she had become and points to research on combat trauma which suggests that:

> Traumatic memory is not narrative. Rather it is experience that re-occurs, either as full sensory replay of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments.[28]

Interestingly both Ricoeur and Brison while highlighting the difficulty of trauma survivors to construct meaningful narratives also point to the therapeutic and healing aspects for such survivors to place their experiences within new understandings and new narratives. Brison writes of how in constructing a narrative of the traumatic event, and then sharing this narrative with others, the survivor not only begins to integrate that event into their life 'with a before and after' but that in doing so the individual also begins to gain control over the occurrence of the flashbacks that characterise post-traumatic stress disorder. [29]

The fact that this is not an uncommon experience for those who have suffered some form of trauma is supported by another writer who also discusses this aspect of narrative and identity, Morny Joy. Joy, in an article dealing with the autobiographical writings of incest victims, suggests that:

> though these women have been manipulated and violated so that their lives may be considered damaged...The first priority of these women would seem to be a reclaiming, a retrieval of a sense of identity...The

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[26] Ricoeur quoted in McCarthy, p. 238
[27] Susan Brison, 'Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity,' in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. D. T. Meyers (Oxford, Westview Press, 1997)
[28] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*,(New York, Scribner, 1994), p. 172
[29] Brison, p. 23

focus in their autobiographical narratives is to investigate this trauma and its influences to the exclusion of all else. In their narratives and their search for meaning, they would appear, in the very act of confronting their past in writing, to be constituting an identity.[30]

What these arguments from Ricoeur, Joy and Brison all seem to suggest is that

experiencing a trauma and its debilitating after effects can seriously affect the

individual's sense of identity. Indeed these experiences can affect the individual

concerned to the extent that they find it difficult, if not impossible, to construct a

narrative account of themselves, let alone one that incorporates their ordeal.

However, all of these writers also suggest that is with the construction of a new

narrative that a degree of healing can be achieved. These arguments are, of course,

completely in line with the assertion that our personal (narrative) identity is mutable.

Before drawing any conclusions from my discussion of these arguments I think it

will be beneficial to review and clarify the steps that have been taken so far. In

summary what I believe the arguments of these two opening sections demonstrate is

that first, it is possible to understand agents with narrative identities as possessing

the potential for autonomous agency and action. This is the position that I think is

being argued for in McNay's analysis of Ricoeur.

Following the establishment of this position and Ricoeur's arguments, as developed

in his later works, it is possible to argue that not only do we, as human beings, have

this capability for autonomy but that it is one that is precarious and susceptible to

being overridden by various fragilities and vulnerabilities. These fragilities are felt

and expressed in a number of ways but it is clear that Ricoeur is aware that amongst

these there are those that originate in and from systems of oppression found in

modern Western societies. Finally, it is clear from my discussion, of not only

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[30] Morny Joy, 'Writing as Repossession: The Narratives of Incest Victims' in *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation*, ed. M. Joy (Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1997), p. 39

Ricoeur but also Brison and Joy, that our ability to construct narratives, and therefore our ability to sustain a sense of identity, is not one that should be taken for granted. That this is the case becomes clear when the evidence of the experiences of trauma survivors is considered because their stories show that this capacity to make sense of ourselves is vulnerable and can be very easily overridden and damaged. Therefore, following McNay's argument that the potentiality for autonomy lies in Ricoeur's accounts of emplotment and mimesis which in turn are central to his arguments for narrative identity it would seem then that if our ability to construct a narrative is impaired so too is our capacity to be autonomous.

So far in my discussion of McNay and Ricoeur much has been said of our potential to be autonomous. The question that this seems to raise is how this potentiality, this capacity is to be realised and can we talk of potential without in some way slipping into some form of naturalism? The answer to the first question, I would suggest, is to adopt a competencies account of autonomy and, indeed, this would appear to be supported by Ricoeur who explicitly talks of the 'high levels of competence,' needed for autonomous behaviour. Also, according to Diana Meyers, to become competent in an activity does presuppose some 'native potentialities' but that it is not possible to acquire the repertory of skills required to achieve competency outside of a social setting. So, while an individual may have more or less aptitude for any given activity it can only be more or less fully realised through instruction or practice.[31] Meyers here gives the example of Mozart's prodigious musical talent which, she argues, would never have reached its full expression if he had been born the son of a poor agricultural worker rather than the child of musician. Therefore, she concludes, competencies are neither purely natural but neither are they purely social and so, 'all

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[31] Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 57

people have the inborn potential necessary for autonomy, but...they learn how to consult their selves through social experience.'[32] Clearly what is meant and entailed by a competencies account of autonomy now needs to be clarified and expanded upon.

3. Autonomy Competency

In beginning to discuss what is meant by a competencies account of autonomy I am going to start by considering what it does not entail. What a competencies account does not allow for is conceptualising autonomy in such a way that it is understood as being a state of being that is achieved or entered into as a final end point. This is an argument that has already been encountered within this thesis as this is the concept of autonomy that is proposed by Kohlberg when he argues that the final stage of moral development is achieved when we adopt Kant's categorical imperative and accept that right is acting in accordance with rules that you would be willing to recognise as universal laws i.e. Kantian moral autonomy.

Furthermore, as argued in Chapter 2, Kohlberg maintained that this pattern of development is universal and irreversible, so once you have progressed through these stages of development it is impossible to regress: so once you are (morally) autonomous you remain (morally) autonomous. While recognising that Kohlberg is talking strictly about moral development and therefore moral autonomy and that this thesis is concerned with personal autonomy I think that it is clear to see that such a static understanding of the state of autonomy is insupportable for a number of reasons.

If we are to understand our selves and our identities as dynamic , fluid and subject to change then it stands to reason that our characteristics and our attributes will also be

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[32]Meyers, 1989, pp. 57-8

dynamic, fluid and subject to change. Autonomy should not, therefore, be construed as a static character attribute but should rather be understood as something that is achieved in degrees and that this achievement can and does alter over time.

This achievement, according to Meyers, comes as the result of the individual becoming more or less competent at 'a repertory of co-ordinated skills' that supports autonomous action and agency.[33] In her article, 'Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self,' Meyers suggests that this co-ordinated set of skills should include but is not limited to:

i) Introspective skills which allow individuals to become sensitive to their own feelings and desires and also allows them to interpret their subjective experience.

ii) Imaginative skills which allow individuals to imagine a variety of possible futures open to them.

iii) Memory skills allow individuals to recall relevant experiences not only from their own past but those that they have been told about.

iv) Communication skills allow individuals to access and benefit from other's perceptions, advice and support in any given situation.

v) Analytical and reasoning skills which allow individuals to compare and assess the different options that are open to them at any given time.

vi) Volitional skills which allow individuals to resist pressure from others to adopt or embrace a self-understanding that they do not view as their own. These skills also enable agents to remain committed to an understanding

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[33] Meyers, 1989, p. 56

of themselves that they consider to be genuinely their own or even authentic.[34]

At first glance this list of skills may seem overwhelming. I remember noting a query in the margin of my book when I first read Meyer's article wondering who this individual was that they could possess all these skills and be sufficiently proficient in all these areas to count as an autonomous agent? A similar concern is raised by Beate Rössler in her article 'Problems with Autonomy' when she argues that:

> Although the autonomy or freedom of the individual is in itself an acceptable ideal, we simply do not live in a way that corresponds to it, nor could we ever. Everyday life, normal everyday chaos, is always much too involved and complicated to permit us to speak of an autonomous life as being something actually realizable.[35]

Rössler's argument may well be a valid one if the concept of autonomy under consideration was that of a static state, i.e. you are either autonomous or you are not. However, I do not think that her criticism stands against a competencies account and neither do I feel now that my initial reaction to Meyers' skills inventory was justified.

According to Meyers for an individual to be autonomous they must possess and successfully use those skills listed above that constitute autonomy competency. However she also recognises the criticism that such a 'conception of autonomy leaves the impression that autonomous people must make autonomy their major preoccupation in life.'[36] I do not think, and neither does Meyers, that a competencies account of autonomy has to leave us with this impression.

As I noted above, when I first read the list of skills that Meyers believes necessary to autonomous agency I was dismayed as it seemed to require individuals to be

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[34] Diana Tietjens Meyers, 'Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self' in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. C. Mackenzie and N. Stoljar (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 166
[35] Beate Rössler, 'Problems with Autonomy' in *Hypatia*, Vol.17 No. 4, (2002), 143-162 (p. 143)
[36] Meyers, 1989. p. 85

constantly on their toes. Autonomous agents, this list seemed to suggest, appear not only to be thinking about what they are doing but also how they are doing it, all the time! However, after giving the issue some thought it began to become clear that actually this is a list of skills that, once we have learnt how to, many of us exercise without paying too much attention to. These capabilities become habit; attitudes and approaches that we adopt but that we do not necessarily have to analyse every time we use them. Furthermore, understanding autonomy and the skills appropriate to it, in this manner is, I believe, entirely in keeping with Ricoeur's arguments about innovation and sedimentation in the development of character traits.

That we do not have to constantly pay attention to our autonomy competency is an argument that Meyers also rejects. She suggests that rather than live in a constant state of introspection autonomous individuals should instead be sensitive to feeling ashamed, disgusted, exasperated or dismayed with themselves. Feelings such as these, Meyers argues, suggest that the individual has on that occasion failed to exert autonomous control over their actions.[37] They are the warning bells that alert us to the fact that we have not thought or behaved as we would wish ourselves to and that we need to stop and actively re-assess our behaviour. Furthermore Meyers suggests that the fact that we all, on occasions, feel like this also points to the reality that we are not, and indeed cannot be, autonomous all the time because to believe that we are is to assert, wrongly, some form of human infallibility.[38]

However, to argue that we do not need to give our full attention to our autonomy skills all of the time is not to suggest that we can ignore them and that they will take care of themselves. As Meyers argues, 'autonomy cannot be sustained without the

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[37] Meyers, 1989, p. 86
[38] Meyers, 1989, p. 87

exercise of autonomy skills, for these skills atrophy with disuse.'[39] This atrophy may result not only from disuse due to apathy or laziness but I think it is also possible for such skills to be actively undermined or destroyed in oppressive or abusive situations. We have already seen how suffering from a traumatic event, for example a sexual assault, can disrupt an individual's ability to construct a narrative. I think it is also possible to suggest that such trauma can also radically affect the agent's autonomy. Many women who are the victims of domestic abuse, psychological as well as physical, are actively deprived, over time, of the opportunities to exercise their autonomy skills:

> He was a very dominating person. You did what he said or else. You went to bed when he said, you got up when he said, you ate when he said, you went out when he said and you drank when he said. If you went out at night with him and you didn't want any more to drink, we'd get into the car and he'd tear down the road and then he'd slam the brakes on so hard, I'd hit my head on the windscreen.[40]

Clearly a woman in this situation is not in control of her life. She is not self-determining or self-directing however the benefit of adopting a competency account of autonomy means that such an individual does not have to be understood as lacking autonomy in every way. This type of autonomy Meyers characterises as episodic, or narrowly programmatic, rather than globally programmatic.[41] Viewing autonomy in this manner, as occurring unevenly, allows us to construct accounts of autonomy that are capable of explaining how it is that someone is capable of exercising their autonomy competencies in one area of their life but not in another. By recognising that women such as the anonymous respondent above can still be minimally autonomous in the face of such barbaric and oppressive behaviour allows us to explain how it is that they can resist such behaviour and leave the relationship,

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[39] Meyers, 1989, p. 87
[40] Anonymous respondent quoted in V. Binney, G. Harkell and J. Nixon, *Leaving Violent Men: A Study of Refuges and Housing for Abused Women* (Bristol, Women's Aid Federation England Ltd., 1988), p 4
[41] Meyers, 1989, p. 48

or at least attempt to.

Furthermore, Meyers suggests that because of patterns of gendered socialisation such capabilities are not acquired equally so that men and women tend to exercise such autonomy competencies in an uneven manner. As Mackenzie and Stoljar suggest:

> Contemporary Western cultures...tend to encourage in women the skills involved in self-discovery because they encourage the development in women of emotional receptivity and perceptiveness. However, women are less likely to be encouraged to develop skills of self-direction and self-definition. It is precisely these skills that are more likely to be developed in men, at the expense of skills of self-discovery.[42]

Meyers expands her position by arguing that women who are subject to such gendered socialisation are also more likely to exercise episodic or narrowly programmatic autonomy.

Of course it does not necessarily follow that those women who have grown into adulthood in societies that have strong gender identities see themselves as oppressed or as unhappy. Meyers points to those individuals whose lives are happy, smooth running and apparently happy but yet, according to her account, do not count as autonomous agents either:

> Such people may lead lives that conform to customary expectations about what constitutes a worthwhile life – thus they may be mistaken for autonomous people – but a cursory inspection of their decision making procedures will reveal that they do not control their own lives – thus they are not autonomous.[43]

This argument begins to return us to the concern that I raised at the very beginning of this thesis, that feminist philosophers working on theories of autonomy are often not overly concerned with those outrageous characters the nefarious neurosurgeons and the horrid hypnotists that populate so many hierarchical / procedural accounts of autonomy. Instead I suggested that feminist philosophers were engaged with the very

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[42] Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, 'Autonomy Refigured,' in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and Self*. ed. C. Mackenzie and N. Stoljar (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 18
[43] Meyers, 1989, pp. 88-9

real forces of oppressive socialisation and actual prevailing social norms and with trying to explain their difficult and complex effects on women's ability to lead autonomous lives. The difficulties in trying to sort out the technicalities of whether someone has autonomously chosen to be heteronomous, or indeed if this is even a live possibility, were also considered at this point.

There are a number of arguments that are being run together here but in order to answer them I will need to begin to consider whether the concept of autonomy should be understood as a being purely procedural or if, instead, it should be construed in some sense as substantive. After considering the debates involved in trying to answer this question I shall also consider whether autonomy is constitutively relational or not.

4. Procedural versus Substantive Accounts of Autonomy

In their most basic terms procedural accounts of autonomy argue that the contents of an agent's desires, beliefs, values and emotional attitudes are irrelevant to the issue of whether or not the agent is autonomous with respect to their actions.[44] The prevalence of such accounts within contemporary philosophy is, argues James Taylor, as a result of the recognition that philosophical discussions:

> must take into account the deep pluralism of contemporary Western society and that employing a discursive framework that holds respect for [procedural] autonomy to be one of its central tenets would achieve this. This is because to respect autonomy is to allow persons to form, revise, and pursue their own conception of the good.[45]

Clearly this debate has strong connections to the debates in political philosophy over the liberal principle of neutrality.

Interestingly Meyers characterises her competency account as a procedural theory of

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[44] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 13
[45] James Stacey Taylor, *Personal Autonomy: New Essays on Personal Autonomy and Its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 18-9

autonomy because, she argues, we all, as individuals, differ too greatly in terms of talents, character traits, abilities and our values for us to be able to construct a blueprint of what it is that constitutes an autonomous life. For Meyers, 'whether episodic or programmatic, what makes the difference between autonomous and heteronomous decisions is the way in which people arrive at them – the procedures they follow or fail to follow.'[46]

Adopting such a procedural approach has the benefit of allowing us to regard more people rather than less as autonomous and this in turn is desirable according to Dworkin because, 'any feature that is going to be fundamental in moral thinking must be a feature that persons share.'[47] It does not, however, address the central concern of much feminist writing on autonomy that:

> If women's professed desires are products of their inferior position, should we give credence to those desires? If so, we seem to be capitulating to institutionalised injustice by gratifying warped desires. If not we seem to be perpetuating injustice by showing the deepest disrespect for these individuals.[48]

It is in trying to answer these questions that feminist theorists such as Catriona Mackenzie and Marina Oshana have argued for substantive rather than procedural accounts of autonomy.

There are, broadly speaking, two forms of substantive autonomy theories; strong and weak. Oshana is a proponent of strong substantive autonomy theory which suggests that in order to count as autonomous the choices and preferences of all agents require specific contents.[49] Mackenzie on the other hand argues for a weakly substantive understanding of autonomy which calls for constraints on the contents of our desires

[46] Meyers, 1989, p. 52
[47] Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1988), p. 9
[48] Meyers, 1989, p. xi
[49] Marina Oshana, 'Personal Autonomy and Society', in *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol.29 No. 1 (1998), 81-102

and references in order to be considered autonomous.[50] The problem for such substantive accounts of autonomy as given by Oshana and Mackenzie is that they often have to defend themselves against charges of exposing agents to the danger of 'extensive forms of unwarranted paternalistic intervention.'[51]

One critic of substantive approaches such as these is John Christman whose procedural approach to autonomy I briefly discussed at the end of Chapter 1. Christman is sympathetic to the arguments that any account of autonomy must be historical and awake to the fact that our capacity for reflection on our desires and preferences can be subject to various distorting influences e.g. alcohol, drugs, and high emotions.[52] However, Christman rejects any substantive approach to autonomy on the grounds that it, 'problematically imports a perfectionist view of human values into the account of autonomy and thereby threaten(s) to undermine the usefulness of the concept in certain theoretical and practical contexts in which it is often seen to function.'[53]

It should be noted that Christman has a tendency to group all forms of substantive autonomy theory under the label of relational autonomy. This is unhelpful because as I have already noted there are two main forms of argument for substantive autonomy (weak and strong) and furthermore, Meyer's arguments, which she describes as procedural, are also included under the heading of relational autonomy. However, it soon becomes clear that Christman's main target for criticism is the strongly substantive account given by Oshana.

In Oshana's articles 'Personal Autonomy and Society,' and 'How Much Should We

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[50] Catriona Mackenzie 'Relational Autonomy, Normative Authority and Perfectionism,' in *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 39 No. 4 (2008), 512-533
[51] Mackenzie, p. 513
[52] John Christman, 'Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism, and the Social Constitution of Selves', *Philosophical Studies*, 117 (2004), 143-164
[53] Christman, 2004, p. 146

Value Autonomy?' she contends that even with the conditions that Christman places on his procedural understanding of autonomy such an account still allows us to understand as autonomous an agent who has chosen a life of submission to oppressive relationships and social structures. In 'How Much Should We Value Autonomy?' Oshana uses an example of an educated woman who chooses to submit herself to the constraints imposed by the Taliban though it would be equally possible to use examples of women in the United States of America who describe themselves as surrendered wives and form part of what has become known as the Quiverful movement. Such women can be understood as satisfying the conditions for procedural autonomy but, Oshana argues, once they have made such a decision, to live a life of subservience and dependence upon their husbands and religious leaders, such women have in fact forfeited their global or dispositional autonomy.[54] As Mackenzie argues, 'for Oshana...autonomy precludes a socio-relational status that subordinates an agent to the will of others and thereby constrains her future choices.'[55]

One of the key criticisms that Christman makes of such substantive theories of autonomy is to charge them with internal inconsistency. Again Christman's main target here is Oshana's approach and he raises this charge of inconsistency because, he argues, 'as fundamentally "social" as this account appears, there are curiously individualistic elements to it.'[56] Oshana, in line with nearly all feminist theorising, wishes to stress the embedded and relational nature of agency but it would seem that for the Taliban woman in Oshana's example to count as autonomous she would have to reject those very social relations that constitute and make up her identity. This inconsistency arises because of Oshana's strongly substantive belief that,

[54] Marina Oshana, 'How Much Should We Value Autonomy?' *Social Philosophy and Policy,* Vol. 20 No. 2 (2003), 99-126
[55] Mackenzie, p. 521
[56] Christman, 2004, p. 150

'autonomous agents must have certain value commitments and/or must be treated in certain normatively acceptable ways.'[57]

This criticism of Christman's also points to his other concern with substantive theories of autonomy and that is their moral and or political perfectionism. As I briefly mentioned earlier procedural theories remain content neutral because it is argued that to do otherwise would have two deleterious effects. First, allowing substantive content to agent's beliefs and preferences would, Christman argues, undermine the respect due to the autonomy of those individuals who, for religious and ideological reasons, choose to authentically embrace modes of life that are based on hierarchies of status and subservience. Second, Christman argues that substantive theories of autonomy run the risk of disenfranchising those individuals who are already marginalised and discriminated against politically and socially. Both of these points, Christman argues, suggest that the adoption of substantive, perfectionist theories of autonomy open up the potential risk of paternalistic interventions because to say of a person (in relation to the content of her beliefs or values) that, 'she is *not* autonomous implies that she does not enjoy the status marker of an independent citizen whose perspective and value orientation get a hearing in the democratic process that constitutes legitimate social policy.'[58]

That we should be alert to the potential dangers of social exclusion and paternalism seems to me to be a central tenet of feminist thought and I think Christman is correct to highlight the possibility of them resulting from such strongly substantive thinking on autonomy. Like Christman and Mackenzie, I think that strong substantive theories of autonomy such as Oshana's can legitimately be criticised for not taking these

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[57] Christman, 2004, p. 151
[58] Christman, 2004, p. 157

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dangers into account.[59] However, like Mackenzie but unlike Christman, I do not feel

that those accounts of autonomy that are weakly substantive are susceptible to the

same charges. Furthermore, I agree with Meyers when she suggests that in the

context of pervasive and powerful socialising forces that it is not autonomy that

should be taken for granted in the absence of proven heteronomy. It is autonomy that

must be proven.[60]

Mackenzie begins her defence of a weakly substantive theory of autonomy by

suggesting that procedural accounts of autonomy are not secure from worrying about

the dangers of paternalism either. All theories of autonomy, Christman's procedural

account included, argue that there are conditions that must be met before anyone can

be considered autonomous. Therefore, any theory of autonomy, procedural or

substantive, Mackenzie argues, should take care to ensure that it is not being used 'to

justify unwarranted paternalism or to further politically disenfranchise the

marginalised.'[61]

Mackenzie then builds her argument by also stressing the 'by degrees' nature of

autonomy. Once this is recognised, she argues, it follows that our rights, as citizens,

to *de jure* political autonomy can and should be understood as requiring a minimal

threshold level of competence. If considered capable of reaching this minimal level

of competence agents should then be entitled to enjoy all the rights and liberties that

this guarantees, including, Mackenzie stresses, the freedom from unwarranted

paternalistic interventions from the state. However, Mackenzie contends, political

autonomy is not the same as personal autonomy. Again, personal autonomy is to be

understood as being obtained and held in degree but in this instance the capacities

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[59] Mackenzie, p. 523
[60] Meyers, 1989, p. 86
[61] Mackenzie, p. 523

required to be considered autonomous go far beyond the minimal threshold of our *de jure* rights.[62]

Mackenzie concludes , in part, that Christman is right to raise the possibility that those theories of autonomy which place excessively stringent qualifying conditions on personal autonomy could be used to undermine the *de jure* rights of individuals to political autonomy. She goes on though to suggest that what Christman fails to do however is to consider the ways in which weaker substantive conditions could play a positive role:

> For they can be used to explain how abusive or oppressive interpersonal relationships and exclusionary social and political institutions are unjust; namely, because they impair and restrict agents' capacities to develop and exercise *de facto* personal autonomy, even if they possess *de jure* rights to political autonomy.[63]

Furthermore, Mackenzie accepts Christman's charge that substantive theories of autonomy are perfectionist but is untroubled by this claim. Instead she argues that such an argument should not be regarded as a decisive criticism of weakly substantive theories of autonomy.

Perfectionism, for Christman, entails the belief that there are values and moral principles that are valid for all agents independent of the judgement of those individuals. Liberation from oppression, he argues:

> Must be undertaken within a normative framework that leaves the most room for disparate voices, even those that endorse traditional and authoritarian value systems, for it must be accepted, in principle at least, that many women and marginalised people will embrace traditional conceptions of social life and cultural values that offend western ideals of individual self-sufficiency.[64]

I find the last part of this quote from Christman most perplexing in light of the huge body of feminist thought that itself finds those western ideals of individual self-

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[62] Mackenzie, p. 523
[63] Mackenzie, p. 524
[64] Christman, p. 152

sufficiency offensive and wishes to recast both subjectivity and autonomy in relational terms. Furthermore, and as Mackenzie argues, moral or political perfectionism does not have to be construed as a form of monism that can only conceive of and allow one understanding of the good. Instead she argues that it is possible to construct a conception of autonomy that is based on a form of perfectionism that can support, and be supported by, a form of value pluralism.[65]

Mackenzie's analysis of this form of perfectionism that incorporates value pluralism is reliant on the theories of Joseph Raz. In *The Morality of Freedom* Raz suggests that autonomy is not one goal amongst many that can be adopted or rejected at will by the individual. Instead, he argues, autonomy forms an important part in leading a good, valuable and flourishing human life. Raz then moves on to argues that such a view of autonomy based perfectionism actually entails value pluralism rather than a singular conception of the good. This is because, he argues:

> Autonomy is exercised through choice, and choice requires a variety of options to choose from. To satisfy the conditions of the adequacy of the range of options the options available must differ in respects which may rationally affect choice. If all the choices in a life are like the choice between two identical cherries from a fruit bowl, then that life is not autonomous.[66]

So, Mackenzie contends, such a perfectionist account allows us to argue that the state and other social institutions have a positive duty to promote the autonomy of their citizens by fostering the social conditions for autonomy.[67] Such an approach also, she suggests, provides us with the means to get to the heart of Oshana's Taliban example. What is of importance is not whether the woman in this example can autonomously choose to surrender her autonomy but that in making such a choice she forfeits 'an important condition for leading a flourishing life,' and , 'is also

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[65] Mackenzie, p. 528-9
[66] Joseph Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 398
[67] Mackenzie, p. 530

supporting a way of life that requires all women to make this forfeit.'[68]

That adopting such a perfectionist account of autonomy allows for its promotion as a matter of social justice is no small argument. However, while it allows us to criticise oppressive regimes such as the Taliban I think more work is needed if we are to construct a weakly substantive account of autonomy that can account for instances of vulnerability or fragility on a more personal scale e.g. women who have suffered domestic abuse. As I argued earlier autonomy is best understood as entailing competency in a number of skills e.g. memory, communication and reasoning skills. However, a number of theorists such as Catriona Mackenzie and Paul Benson want to argue that while these skills are necessary for the individual to be autonomous they are not sufficient. Rather, they suggest, being autonomous also requires having a certain attitudes towards oneself that include self-respect, self-worth and self-trust.[69]

The importance of holding these attitudes can be seen if we look at Meyer's category of analytical and reasoning skills. Holding such skills, she suggests, gives us the ability to compare and assess the different options that are available to us at any given moment before making a choice between them. However, if we then consider the ways in which women in abusive relationships have their self-worth and their self-respect eroded over time by the actions of their partners we can see that such skills become empty of any real opportunity. As Mackenzie argues, 'Lack of self-esteem undermines autonomy because if one does not think of one's life and one's activities as worthwhile it is difficult to determine what to do and how to act.'[70]

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[68] Mackenzie, p. 529
[69] Mackenzie, p. 525 and Paul Benson, 'Feminist Intuitions and the Normative Substance of Autonomy,' in *Personal Autonomy: New Essays on Personal Autonomy and Its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, ed. J.S. Taylor (Cambridge University Press, 2005)
[70] Mackenzie, p. 525

Furthermore, in an article entitled 'Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition and Justice,' Axel Honneth and Joel Anderson argue that our capacity for 'basic self-confidence' is central to the kind of reflexive self-interpretation that is involved in autonomous deliberation. [71] Mackenzie then construes this argument as suggesting that a, 'lack of self-trust or self-confidence impairs our capacity to understand ourselves and to respond flexibly to life changes.'[72] These arguments, I suggest, lead us back to Ricoeur, because what these writers seem to be describing are those states of vulnerability or fragility that Ricoeur argues stand in opposition to autonomy and that I discussed in Chapter Four.

Such weakly normative considerations must be allowed to take their place in the reconfiguration of autonomy called for by so many feminist theorists. I do not feel that such substantive claims mean that we have to revert to a transcendent claim about autonomy. This is because the substantive capacities that I am claiming are necessary for an agent to be considered autonomous can be understood as contextual, fluid and, like all the other autonomy competencies, held in degree. So, for example, it is perfectly possible to imagine a scenario where a woman could feel self-confident and have a high degree of trust in her own abilities at work but at the same time this woman could also be in a personal relationship that does not allow her to exercise that same self-confidence at home.

Furthermore, in understanding autonomy in this weakly substantive way it allows us to see that while the Jesuit monk of Chapter One may not be fully autonomous we may choose not to be troubled by that state of affairs because his capacities for self-esteem and self-worth have not been eroded. At the same time such an approach also

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[71] Joel Anderson, and Axel Honneth, 'Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Justice', in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays'* ed. J. Christman and J. Anderson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005)
[72] Mackenzie, p. 525

allows us to be concerned for those agents who may on the surface appear to be exercising autonomous preferences but whose abilities and capacities have been seriously undermined by oppressive social and interpersonal relations From these arguments I think it is clear that autonomy should be conceptualised as a weakly substantive concept but before drawing any final conclusions there is one last argument that needs to be clarified and that is whether autonomy should also be understood as a relational concept.

5. Relational Autonomy

In what has become an article often cited by those writing about feminist approaches to autonomy Mackenzie and Stoljar suggest in 'Autonomy Refigured' that many of these accounts point to the need for 'a more fine-grained and richer account of the autonomous agent [and] to the need to think of autonomy as a characteristic of agents who are emotional, embodied, desiring, creative and feeling as well as rational, creatures.'[73]

Furthermore, Mackenzie and Stoljar suggest that those arguments that have analysed the ways in which socialisation and social relationships can both enhance and impede an agent's capacity for autonomy have also highlighted the way in which an agent's self-conception is connected to both her social context and her capacities for autonomy. Therefore, they suggest, theorists who wish to emphasis these connections look in particular at the relationships that can be drawn between autonomy and feelings of self-respect, self-worth and self-trust.[74] Such arguments Mackenzie and Stoljar suggest should be considered as providing support for the concept of relational autonomy.

It must be recognised though that those theories that argue for the existence of

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[73] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 21
[74] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 22

causally necessary relational conditions for the attainment of autonomy cause little controversy amongst contemporary philosophers. This is an argument made by Freidman in *Autonomy, Gender and Politics* when she argues that, 'mainstream philosophers of autonomy are not guilty of the feminist charge that they simply ignore social relationships in their accounts of autonomy.'[75] This is a fair point and while, for example Christman, rejects the label of relational autonomy he does accept that certain social conditions must be present in order for autonomy to be present. I do however think it needs to be made clear that Friedman is, I believe, referring to very recent philosophers of autonomy because as I argued in Chapter One there have been contemporary and highly influential accounts that have not taken the contextual and historical nature of autonomy into account.

Having made this argument Friedman does then go on to say that acknowledging this shift in mainstream philosophical thought is not to suggest that feminists should no longer be concerned with the concept of autonomy but that the debate now lies in answering the question:

> Is the inherent relationality of autonomy fully explained by the social nature of the selves who realise it, or is autonomy, apart from the social nature of the persons who realise it, also a social trait or process? For that matter, what could it mean to say that autonomy per se is intrinsically social or constitutively social?[76]

I shall now focus on this question of whether autonomy should be considered as constitutively relational but answering it will prove to be a little more contentious than establishing relational agency. To be honest I am not entirely sure that the distinction that Freidman is trying to make here can in fact be made but this is a point that I shall develop while considering the arguments of Jules Holroyd who does accept this distinction.

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[75] Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 97
[76] Friedman, p. 96

In an article titled 'Relational Autonomy and Paternalistic Intervention,' Jules Holroyd argues that accounts of autonomy that understand it as constitutively relational incorporate the following condition: a necessary condition for autonomous agency is that the agent stands in social relations S.[77] Holroyd rejects such a position because, she argues, accounts of relational autonomy, 'cannot play one of autonomy's key normative roles: identifying those agents who ought to be protected from (hard) paternalistic intervention.'[78]

It is immediately clear that Holroyd's concerns about relational autonomy are similar to those of Christman's that I considered in the previous section because she too is concerned that relational theories of autonomy allow for the possibility of paternalistic interventions in the lives of seemingly competent autonomous agents. However, there are also significant differences between these two thinkers.

As already considered in the previous section Christman's suggestion is that relational theories of autonomy cannot prevent paternalism because they allow moral and political perfectionism, they are in other words, value laden. Holroyd's contention is that while Christman is right to reject constitutively relational conceptions of autonomy he does so for the wrong reasons:

> For Christman, 'that the agent does not subscribe to certain values' is the wrong reason for regarding her as lacking in self-governance. The concern here, rather, is that, 'that the agent does not stand in certain social relations' is the wrong reason for regarding her as lacking in self-governance.[79]

According to Holroyd the relations in which an agent stands should have no bearing on whether it is permissible or not to allow paternalistic interventions into that agent's life. Rather, she argues, decisions such as these should be based on the agent's competence in exercising her autonomy-relevant capacities, a point that

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[77] Jules Holroyd, 'Relational Autonomy and Paternalistic Interventions,' *Res Publica*, Vol.15 No. 4 (2009), 321-336 (p. 321)
[78] Holroyd, p. 321
[79] Holroyd, p. 335

Holroyd says 'holds irrespective of whether constitutively relational conceptions are value laden or not.'[80]

It should be made clear at this point that Holroyd is specifically concerned with autonomous agency as opposed to autonomous action or choice and allows that the latter two forms of autonomy may yet be shown to constitutively relational. Her arguments in this article are focused solely on accounts of autonomous agency. She suggests that it is possible to make this distinction because:

> An agent is autonomous when she has the capacities relevant to autonomy: capacities for belief formation, deliberation and choice, formation of plans and adoption of commitments and projects...Thus it is a precondition for autonomous choice and action that the agent is autonomous – has the relevant capacities. But an autonomous agent may nonetheless fail to choose or act, on occasion, autonomously.[81]

I am not convinced by this argument but would like to postpone considering my objections to it until I have considered Holroyd's position more fully.

From the arguments outlined so far it is possible to see that Holroyd regards autonomy as an internal condition and that any attempt to describe possible constitutive relations for autonomy is to posit external conditions. According to Holroyd, it is not just that the agent must be a certain way; relational autonomy theorists also believe that the world must be a certain way.[82] Of course Holroyd accepts those arguments that support causal relational conditions for autonomy: certain social conditions may cause the agent to meet, or indeed fail to meet, those internal conditions necessary for autonomy. What she is rejecting is the argument that these conditions can be construed as being constitutive of autonomous agency. This includes, Holroyd argues, the position I developed above whereby an agent must have some sense of self-respect or self-worth in relation to her competencies in

[80] Holroyd, p. 335
[81] Holroyd, p. 326
[82] Holroyd, p. 330

order to count as autonomous. [83]

Holroyd gives two main supporting arguments for rejecting this idea of relational autonomy. First she argues, as Meyers does, that individuals can show remarkable resistance in the maintenance of autonomy in the face of difficult social conditions that would appear to make autonomous choice and action nigh on impossible. Such individuals Holroyd argues pose a substantial challenge to the idea that social relations of confidence or respect are necessary in order to meet the internal conditions of autonomy. While this is true, Meyers does point to such individuals, she does so in a more nuanced way than I think Holroyd's presentation of her argument allows. Meyers does suggest that most individuals even if they are living 'within the confines of oppressive regimes,' will not 'altogether lack autonomy.' However she then qualifies this statement by arguing that many people living in such societies or environments 'will enjoy autonomy in at least some parts of their lives.'[84] Holroyd seems to regard autonomous agency as something you have or you do not have which is not what I believe Meyers to be arguing at all. I believe Meyers is suggesting that it is amazing that people in these situations demonstrate autonomy in any aspect of their lives, not that their lives are fully autonomous.

Whether or not the wider relations in which they stand are conducive to autonomy development such individuals must have been in autonomy fostering relations at some point in their development as agents to have learnt the necessary skills with which to exercise their autonomy capacities. Furthermore, and as discussed earlier, such individuals must remain in some positive autonomy supporting relations because, as Meyers herself acknowledges, such competencies atrophy if not used.

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[83] Holroyd, p. 332

[84] Diana Tietjens Meyers, 'Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self' in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. C. Mackenzie and N. Stoljar (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 152

Finally, what I think the existence of these individuals demonstrates is that our potential to be autonomous is far more robust than is perhaps suggested by some accounts of autonomy. It may be that we need to regard it as less of a delicate, rare orchid and more like a hardy perennial!

This understanding of autonomous agency as a static state once it is achieved is a continuing concern when Holroyd's second criticism is considered. Here she suggests that while particular social relations may be causally necessary for agents to require the skills needed to reflect upon their reasons for action that it is not necessary after the acquisition of these skills for the agent to remain in a particular social relationship to engage in this kind of reflective practice. Therefore, she concludes, 'that insofar as we want to maintain a conception of autonomy that can play a role in delineating the bounds of paternalism we ought not accept a constitutively relational conception of autonomous agency.'[85] Further support for my concerns are to be found when despite referencing Meyer's arguments for episodic and programmatic autonomy Holroyd applies the former to autonomous choice and the latter to autonomous agency:

> Moreover, the conditions for agency may pertain to the agents abilities and circumstances over time, whereas the conditions for choice or action may concern, rather, a specific time frame or time slice (that of agent's choice or action). A pre-existing distinction in the literature between episodic...and programmatic...autonomy touches on these differences.[86]

It is not my belief that this is the distinction that Meyers had in mind when she developed these understandings of autonomy. The competencies account of autonomy allows that autonomous agency may be an uneven state of being, stronger at one time than another and in one situation rather than another. Our internal autonomous capacities once achieved are not static; they are fluid, dynamic and

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[85] Holroyd, pp. 335-6
[86] Holroyd p. 325

subject to change.

This point leads me into my next criticism of Holroyd which centres on her assertion that gaining the ability to reflect on our reasons for action relies on particular social conditions but that once obtained these social conditions become irrelevant. It would appear from these arguments that Holroyd appears to be working with a conception of identity and agency that while socially embedded in their formation, once achieved they become immutable. This of course is exactly the understanding of identity and agency that I have spent this Thesis arguing against.

Autonomous agency is not just a matter of achieving the right set of internal conditions, they must also be maintained. As I have already discussed earlier in this chapter Meyers argues that such competencies can atrophy through disuse. Therefore, those causal social conditions that allow the development of autonomous agency do not become an irrelevance once it is achieved because, as I have already argued, autonomy is a condition that is dynamic and fluid. Therefore the continued existence of such autonomy supporting conditions is required in order to maintain and support autonomous agency. This does not however show autonomy to be constitutively relational. In order to make this argument I think it will be necessary to return to Ricoeur and theories of narrative identity.

6. Narrative Identity and Relational Autonomy

A key feminist criticism of traditional, mainstream conceptions of autonomy is that they have been based on a masculine illusion of self-containment that has denied the relational nature of the self.[87] Holroyd's argument seems to want to suggest that while we are relational agents our autonomy remains an internal, self-contained state and while is it causally relational it is not constitutively relational. I would like to

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[87] McNay, p. 151

argue that this is a deeply confused position.

In order to do this I will return to McNay's analysis of Ricoeur and his emphasis on the entangled nature of those moments of identification and disindentification and in which is contained our potential to be autonomous.[88] One of the key problems that McNay identifies with poststructural accounts of subjectivity, or indeed any of those approaches that she identifies as working within the negative paradigm of subject formation, is their suggestion that our relation to the other, or to alterity, is based 'only on the dynamics of disavowal and exclusion.'[89] Ricoeur's account of identity formation, as already demonstrated does not rely on such an exclusionary logic but indeed acknowledges that 'the identical and non-identical are inextricable and intrinsic to any process of self-formation.'[90] Therefore the other is not disavowed but is an integral part of our narrative self-understanding.

Furthermore, in discussing the work of Castoriadis McNay argues that understanding the individual as a social creation allows for the conception of autonomy to be reformed so that it is not understood as a self-enclosed state but as an active-passive relation with the other.[91] These arguments could, I believe, be applied in part to Ricoeur's work. Returning to 'Autonomy and Vulnerability', Ricoeur argues that there are, 'two poles: the effort to think for oneself and the domination or rule by the other. The identity of each person, and hence his or her autonomy, is constructed between these two poles.'[92] So, if we accept his account of narrative identity and the proposition that our potential to be autonomous relies on the deeply relational nature of its structure it is impossible to conceive of autonomy as anything other than constitutively relational.

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[88] McNay, p. 105
[89] McNay, p. 99
[90] McNay, p. 103
[91] McNay, p. 151
[92] Ricoeur, 2007, p. 83

7. Conclusion

So in summary I believe that the arguments considered in this chapter can be seen to demonstrate a number of clear steps in working towards an understanding of the autonomous agent that I believe is sensitive to many of the feminist criticisms raised back in Chapters Two and Three. First, through McNay's analysis of Ricoeur's arguments it is possible to locate our potential for autonomy. Second, having located such a potentiality I discussed the ways in which this could be developed into a full account of autonomy competency. Understanding autonomy as a set of skills or competencies, I argue allows us to construct a fluid and dynamic account of autonomy to complement the fluid and dynamic account of self that is generated by a narrative sense of identity. Finally, I conclude that such a conception of autonomy needs to be further understood as being weakly substantive and constitutively relational rather than the purely procedural and conditionally relational accounts of autonomy.

Autonomy and Agency: A Conclusion

This Thesis began from the premise that there was still work to be done on the concepts of autonomy and agency from a feminist perspective. In order to explore these issues I described and considered the ways in which mainstream philosophical accounts of autonomy have been developed before moving on to discuss the specific concerns that feminist philosophers, of all types, have raised against such conceptions.

So in summary, having discussed both Kant's philosophy of moral autonomy and the more contemporary approaches of Frankfurt, Dworkin and Christman by the end of Chapter One it was possible for me to indicate the ways in which many traditional accounts of autonomy have been unable to accommodate successfully the problems that a context of oppressive and inegalitarian socialisation raises for our understanding of autonomous action. These problems are, I suggest, akin to the Problem of Manipulation as commonly understood by philosophers however the context of oppressive socialisation is a very definite 'real' world problem and so there is no need for toy examples such as those outlandish characters, who have been with us from the start, the horrid hypnotist and nefarious neurosurgeon who are so often found in mainstream accounts of autonomy.

In Chapter Two I considered and discussed in some depths the five main feminist critiques of autonomy as defined by Mackenzie and Stoljar. They have labelled such critiques the metaphysical, the symbolic, the care, the postmodern and the diversity. I think that these definitions as provided by Mackenzie and Stoljar are useful tools that allow us to get to the heart of many of the arguments being made by feminists concerned with the concept of autonomy in very quick manner. However, such an

approach, by its very nature, covers a large amount of ground very quickly. And so while useful it also smoothes out many of the more fine grained differences between the theories and approaches being adopted by different writers within these accounts. This is a problem that I feel is particularly evident in Mackenzie and Stoljar's characterisation of the postmodern and diversity critiques.

It should be noted at this point that Mackenzie and Stoljar do acknowledge the 'salutary' nature of the postmodern and diversity critiques in alerting us to the 'need to develop notions of autonomy based on richer, more psychically complex, and more diverse conceptions of agents.'[1] However, I felt that in order to more fully and completely understand what an account of agency capable of supporting a feminist theory of autonomy would entail that it was necessary to examine, in much closer detail, those arguments made by poststructuralist theorists such as Lacan, Derrida and Foucault. Not just these writers but also those theories developed by feminist theorists who consider, and would identify, themselves as working within this philosophical tradition. Though broadly sympathetic to such arguments, that there is no core, immutable, transparent, transcendent self, I also consider towards the end of this third chapter some very valuable criticisms made of such theories of subjectivity and agency that develop out of not only feminist writings but more broadly philosophical and psychological approaches too. I conclude that these theories too have a valid point to make and so, I ultimately conclude that what is required is an account of the self that is fluid, dynamic, processual and multi-faceted but that is also cohesive and stable enough to generate and then support an account of personal autonomy.

The answer, I suggest, is to be found in philosophical accounts that develop the

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[1] Mackenzie and Stoljar, p. 11

concept of narrative identity. While I did consider the theories of Taylor and MacIntyre I found the most fertile ground for my thought in Paul Ricoeur's theories of narrative. Ricoeur's understanding of identity is undoubtedly rich and complex and is reliant on understanding his theories of time, mimesis, identity, sedimentation, innovation and emplotment. All of these ideas, plus some others, ultimately play a part in his conception of narrative. The huge advantage of adopting such an account of self is that it does exactly what I think is necessary to chart a middle course between those who regard the self as somehow fixed and those who would suggest that the self is just another Enlightenment conceit. Our selves, understood within the terms of Ricoeurian narrative theory, are mutable, dynamic and deeply historic but Ricoeur also provides a conception of identity that allows us to consider ourselves as having some sense of permanence and continuity. We are both *ipse* and *idem*.

Having established such an account of the self and defended it against critics of narrative identity such as John Christman and Galen Strawson I was then in a position to move on and consider what form or conception of autonomy would or could be supported by such a narrative agent. A fluid and in-process self can only support a concept of autonomy that is itself mutable and dynamic. Clearly if our understanding of our self over and through time can change then so too our understanding of ourselves as being autonomous or as exercising autonomy will have to change and adapt. To this end I argue therefore that the best way of understanding autonomy is to conceptualise it as a competency or a set of skills. Autonomy then is a skill set that we can learn and is a capacity that we can exercise or possess in degrees dependent upon our competency.

There are, I believe and as I argued in my final chapter, a number of clear advantages to adopting such a conception of autonomy. First, by configuring autonomy as a

competence, a set of skills that can be acquired this allows us to understand how it is that children become autonomous, they learn. Or maybe, if they are not brought up in conditions that foster the development of these skills they do not become fully autonomous agents. Second, such an approach to autonomy can also accommodate the fact that our competency in exercising such skills can vary over the course of our adult lives too so that it is the case that many elderly people find their autonomy skills impaired through the onset of dementia or indeed just increasing frailty. Third, because autonomy is a skill set it also allows people to be better at some aspects of autonomous agency than others. Referring to the set of skills as defined by Meyers and discussed in Chapter 5 it may be that I have very good memory skills but am less confident in exercising analytical and reasoning skills. The final benefit of conceiving of autonomy in such a manner is that it also allows an understanding of autonomy as potentially unevenly distributed across the different aspects of an individual's life.

Such an account of autonomy is I feel, fairly uncontentious, especially when conceived as a procedural account as Meyers herself suggests. However, and as the problem of oppressive socialisation indicates, I do not believe that it is enough to construct an account of autonomy that is purely procedural and so in the final sections of the fifth chapter I argue, more contentiously, that autonomy should also be conceptualised in such a way as to be understood as weakly substantive and also as constitutively relational.

In making these arguments I recognise that strongly substantive conceptions of autonomy may well be open to the charge that they cannot rule out potential instances of paternalistic intervention. However, I am making the far weaker claim that our autonomy competencies should be held in conjunction with feelings of self-

respect or self-worth rather than a more heavily normative argument. I therefore

defend this position accordingly against Christman who is a theorist who wishes to

adopt a procedural account of autonomy. Such a desire to have autonomy remain

substantively neutral can be seen as arising out of liberal concerns about moral and

political perfectionism. Perfectionism, it is argued, cannot respect the multitude of

goods found in modern, plural, multi-cultural societies. I do not think it is the case,

as Raz argues, that perfectionism has to equal value monism. Furthermore I am not

convinced that liberal politics and their concomitant theories of procedural autonomy

remain as value neutral as is claimed and so, I see no problem with advocating the

adoption of such weak normative claims as self-respect and self-worth as part of my

conception of autonomy.

The final claim I make for my reconfiguration of autonomy is that it is constitutively

relational. This means then that I do not view our capacity for autonomy as relying

only on the presence of the correct social conditions conducive to its development in

us as individuals. Rather, I believe that our autonomy relies on such favourable

circumstances being present not only so that we can develop in the first place as

autonomous agents but also that these conditions must persist if we are to remain

autonomous. If autonomy is a variable state that is present to a greater or lesser

extent throughout our lives then it also follows that we need autonomy supporting

and promoting social conditions throughout our lives and not just as children.

However, I also want to make a stronger claim and suggest that given the nature of

our potential to be autonomous, in line with Ricoeur's arguments regarding

identification and distantiation and ideology and utopia, that our autonomy is

constitutively relational. We cannot be or become autonomous without standing in

relation to others because of the very nature of our formation as subjects or agents.

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Ultimately then I conclude that autonomy should be understood as weakly

substantive and constitutively relational and as a competency that we hold.

This is my end position and I believe that it is a position that is capable of answering

the problem of manipulation as I demonstrated in my last chapter. However the

problem of manipulation was not the only area of feminist concern that I raised and

acknowledged at the beginning of this Thesis. Indeed Chapter Two focused solely on

five main areas of concern that have been raised by feminists of all types of

theoretical persuasion. Though I will not pretend to have been able to answer all of

these concerns in full I think it may be beneficial to outline the ways in which my

Thesis does begin to answer some of these criticisms.

The last two critiques that Mackenzie and Stoljar identify and that I discuss at the

end of Chapter Two are the postmodern and the diversity critiques. This Thesis

developed primarily as a response to the arguments contained within these labels and

I believe that I have demonstrated, at some length, that it is possible to be sensitive

to many of the concerns raised within these critiques and yet still develop an account

of agency that is capable of being autonomous. I shall now turn to consider the

remaining three critiques.

As Mackenzie and Stoljar argue the metaphysical critique is perhaps the most

established in feminist literature. It is concerned with the idea that many mainstream

philosophical theories are based on a mistaken account of the individual as atomistic

and substantively individualistic and because this account of the self is mistaken, the

argument continues, it follows that any account of autonomy based on such an

understanding of the individual will also be mistaken. This is not the same critique as

the postmodern and diversity arguments because it is perfectly possible to construct a

relational account of the self that chimes with traditional understandings of subjectivity. What is needed, such an approach argues is an understanding of the individual as constitutively relational. So to this end I looked at Annette Baier's arguments for second persons which suggest that it is only through our relations of dependence on others that we become persons. Furthermore, and as I argued in Chapter Two, such a shift in our understanding of the individual, from an atomistic one to one that emphasises the importance of our social relations does not entail an outright rejection of autonomy. Instead what is required for feminist theory is a reworking of the concept, a reconfiguration.

The narrative agency that this Thesis proposes is, I believe, in line with this call for individuals to be understood as relational. In particular Ricoeur's arguments on the role of ideology, utopia and imagination stress not only their relational aspect but also their importance in subject formation. The benefit of Ricoeur's approach, as McNay acknowledges, is that it does not valorise such relational dynamics as is often the case in psychoanalytic object-relations theory which is often criticised for over sentimentalising the mother-child dyad.[2] Having established such a relational account of identity this Thesis then goes on to consider what account of autonomy could be supported by such an understanding. Therefore, I would argue that the account of the individual and the account of autonomy that I provide are not susceptible to the feminist metaphysical critique.

The next group of criticisms of autonomy theory that I identified in Chapter Two was the symbolic critique but I am going to pass over these arguments briefly for now because I believe that it is there that I may have to work harder for my position. So instead I am going to turn now to consider those criticisms of autonomy that

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[2] McNay, p. 101

develop out of those arguments for an ethic of care. As the title of this approach suggests care ethics were not originally concerned with theories of autonomy but instead with the ways in which women engaged with, and reasoned about, moral questions. This approach claims that mainstream, traditional moral philosophy downplays the importance of emotional connections and relations of dependency and instead is only concerned with those competent, able-bodied individuals who do not have to care for dependants. Autonomy, it is argued, is to be included within these attributes and therefore cannot be used to describe the lives of a large number of individuals who do not fulfil these criteria. So the question I was left with was, is there a way of reconfiguring autonomy to accommodate dependent relationships? I answered yes at the time and my answer remains yes.

By understanding autonomy as a competency that is exercised through a particular skill set it becomes a capacity, a capability that is held in degrees. There are two implications for the care critique that follow from this claim. First, it is only through relations of inter-dependency that we can be considered autonomous agents at all because it is through such relations that we learn those skills necessary to the exercise of autonomy. Also, because our autonomy can be seen to ebb and flow over our lives the quality of our interpersonal relations have a direct impact on how fully we can exercise our autonomy skills.

Second, the question that I was left with as an undergraduate as a result of reading Kymlicka's analysis of care and its relation to theories of autonomy was how is it possible to be a carer for dependants and yet still remain autonomous? Caring for others, whether they are children, or disabled or frail and elderly, often means putting our wants and needs to one side either temporarily or permanently. There were many times when my children were babies that I wanted or needed to sleep but

they had very different ideas! Does this mean that in this scenario parents are non-autonomous? If autonomy is understood as an all or nothing state, then yes, in this scenario carers of dependants are non-autonomous. If, however, we understand autonomy as being capable of being held and expressed in degrees, as I have argued, then we could say that there are times when caring for others does impact on our autonomy but that this may not be a permanent state of affairs. Such a position may also be used to demonstrate why respite care is such an important resource and needs to be made routinely available to those who find themselves in a position of having to care for others on an extended or permanent basis.

Finally I will now turn and consider those arguments raised by the symbolic critique against autonomy. The charge from this argument is that the concept of autonomy, from a feminist perspective, has become associated with a number of less than desirable characteristics such as self-sufficiency, self-reliance and substantive independence. The argument concludes by suggesting that autonomy is inherently masculinist: it describes a male reality that was never intended for women and cannot simply be extended to include them. I do not think that the conception of autonomy that I have developed and argued for in this Thesis can be accused of displaying these attributes. Furthermore, I agree with Mackenzie and Stoljar that it is perfectly possible to construe autonomy in such a way that it is not susceptible to this critique. However, I do think that such a symbolic critique could be used as a possible criticism of my reliance on narrative identity.

As Eakin suggests in his reply to Strawson it is not the high brow concept of the 'examined life' that Strawson should be concerned with but rather the ways in which, 'deep-seated social conventions...govern narrative self-presentation in everyday life. In fact...identity narratives, delivered piecemeal every day, function as

the signature for others of the individual's possession of a normal identity.'[3] I think

Eakin has a strong and valuable point to consider here. I say this in light of the fact

that I have already argued that this cultural trope of the 'autonomous man' seems to

be alive and doing well in contemporary popular culture with the success of

television series such as *24* and *House* whose main protagonists seem to be made to

custom fit this character ideal.

This becomes a problem for my position when considered in light of Ricoeur's

arguments about mimesis, and indeed about ideology, because as he contends:

> Before any critical distance we belong to a history, to a class, to a nation,
> to a culture, to one or several traditions. In accepting this belonging
> which precedes and supports us, we accept the very first role of ideology
> – the *mediating function of the image or self-representation.*[4]

Kearney then takes this argument and extends it to argue that it is by dint of this

belonging that we are subject to the alienating aspects of ideology: dissimulation and

domination.[5]

These arguments would seem to suggest that as a feminist I may wish to reject such a

theory of narrativity because it would seem to fall prey to the symbolic critique as

developed by Lorraine Code, our social imaginary is dominated by inherently

masculinist themes and character ideals that are essentially inegalitarian and inimical

to feminist thought. This would be entirely true and quite possibly a knock down

blow to narrative theory and my adoption of Ricoeurian analysis if it were not for the

fact that Ricoeur views ideology as forming part of a hermeneutic circle with critical

distance. As Kearney argues, there is a gap, or an aporia, between the present, the

past and the future which allows for the possibility of historical distantiation. In turn

historical distantiation implies the subject distancing itself from itself and it is here

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[3] Paul John Eakin, 'Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism: A Response to Galen Strawson and James Phelan', *Narrative*, Vol. 14 No. 2 (2006), 180-87 (p. 182)

[4] Paul Ricoeur quoted in Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing Ltd.,2004) p. 89

[5] Kearney, p. 89

that the possibility for critical self-imagining, or if you prefer autonomy, is opened up.[6] And so while it is the case that women do have to encounter narratives that are sexist and oppressive it is through their narrative identities and the autonomy that is a potential within those identities that such inegalitarian constructs can be challenged.

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[6] Kearney, p. 89

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