

INTRODUCTION

We encounter the notion of autonomy in virtually every area of philosophy. Its principal aspects are: autonomy in its relation with rationality, personality, self-identity, authenticity (personal autonomy), autonomy in its relation with freedom, moral values, moral motivations (moral autonomy), and autonomy in its relation with forms of government, state sovereignty, legal and social structures and institutions (political autonomy). The three aspects are clearly interrelated, yet not reducible to one another. The omnipresence of the concept of autonomy in philosophical debates is reflected in traditional accounts of the history of Western philosophy, as autonomy constitutes an essential component of rationality, from Plato's and Aristotle's rational self-determination up to the political autonomy and perfectionism debate in contemporary liberal philosophy, passing through the Stoic notion of self-sufficiency, Spinoza's notion of adequate ideas and Kant's moral autonomy as rooted in practical reason. When we include women philosophers in that narrative, as this volume does, the list becomes longer. And were we to make the list more diverse, including non-western philosophers, there is no doubt that it would become even longer. This is perhaps because issues related to autonomy inform not only philosophical practice, but also everyday life. Hardly a single dimension of life can escape evaluations in terms of autonomy: psychological autonomy, economic autonomy, legal autonomy, physical autonomy, autonomy of taste etc. Matters of autonomy may have a different resonance depending on gender, race, sexuality and social class, but all of us struggle with them to some extent.

Nonetheless, part of the efforts to diversify philosophy has resulted in the notion of autonomy becoming subject to significant criticism. In particular, there are two major threads of dissent. The first is the thought that autonomy outweighs or even endangers interpersonal or

collective values (equality, solidarity, care etc.). The second sees autonomy as alienating or marginalizing individual or collective subjects who do not, for different reasons, benefit from a strong form of autonomy. People with physical or psychological disabilities or in dire economic conditions, single parents, women in traditional communities or households, LGBTI persons, ethnic and religious minorities and even whole states may find the requirement that they should aim for autonomy disconcerting or even demeaning. The quest for autonomy requires an institutional, moral and social framework that is partly or wholly denied to a significant portion of the population, and without which autonomy is meaningless.

These criticisms have led to a widespread dissatisfaction, if not out-right skepticism, toward traditional conceptions of autonomy, beginning with the one that is perhaps most influential, namely the Kantian one. Autonomy, understood as the agent's capacity for self-legislation, is at the core of Kant's conception of practical reason. In fact, for Kant, no subject can be said to be free and morally-politically responsible if not based on such-conceived autonomy. Criticisms to Kant's thick version of autonomy, however, remain mostly on the margin of philosophy, in that they are often voiced by those concerned with the shortcomings of existing accounts, so belong to the realms of feminist philosophy, or applied philosophy, rather than mainstream discussion. At the same time, the mainstream discussion relies on a limited canon, and rarely includes contributions from those philosophers who might have reason to question autonomy. Since, despite all criticism, autonomy seems to remain a fundamental and possibly non-dispensable concept, formulating a more sophisticated and non-exclusive version of it is a major task whose importance goes far beyond the borders of the academic debate.

There is, therefore, a strong case to be made for revisiting the concept of autonomy from a wider angle, which includes the perspectives of people who have reason to be suspicious of it. In the case of this volume, we have chosen to put forward the perspective of women philosophers. This is not meant to redress, by itself, the imbalance that can be found in the philosophical debate autonomy, but to make a start, by highlighting some of the ways in which the questions of autonomy can appear different from outside the mainstream perspective. This is also an occasion to build on recent work that has been done on recovering the works of women philosophers of the past, and show how their arguments fit into a debate that reaches to the 21st century in a way that nourishes and enriches the ideas presented by contemporary and past philosophers alike.

In some cases some biographical details is necessary, both because the philosopher in question, her period or her cultural environment are not generally known, and because in other cases the ‘lived’ philosophy of the author casts light on what they wrote. But the focus of this volume is primarily to engage with a specific philosophical topic these philosophers are debating from different angles, namely autonomy, and the way in which philosophical discussions on this topic are or could be informed by this debate, spanning over several periods of the history of philosophy. The volume will therefore contribute both to our knowledge of women philosophers and to the inquiry on the notion of autonomy. The essays collected here aim at illuminating possible patterns of this reformulation by bringing to light and critically assessing the contribution by women philosophers throughout the history of philosophy starting with the Medieval author Hildegard of Bingen and finishing with contemporary philosophers such as Susan Moller Okin and Martha Nussbaum. In this sense, moreover, the volume presents both historical research and contemporary perspectives (both in the “analytic” and the “continental” tradition).

As it is clear, our ambition is to bridge several gaps: between women's philosophical reflection in history and the notion of autonomy in its contemporary relevance, between past and contemporary perspectives, and between different cultural understandings, based on the diverse geographical and institutional rooting of the contributors to this volume.

One might object that there would be no need to bridge gaps in this way if the project had been more focused in the first place – if the essays had focused on questions of autonomy and equality, say, or education. But in fact the concept of autonomy resists this sort of narrowing, especially when seen from the perspective of women philosophers. Instead of a single, universal, and eternal concept of autonomy, we see rather a concept that is always changing, a protean dynamical product of a constant effort, and not a static feature that may, by way of a binary opposition, be attributed to certain subjects (individuals or collective) and not to others. This is not meant to blur the concept of autonomy into an undistinguished mix of feelings and thoughts belonging to every subject and to no subject at all. Rather, we should emphasize the complex, multi-layered character of autonomy as something that is always on the verge of escaping our grasp. In fact, a philosophical approach to autonomy discloses from the very beginning aspects that seem to contradict not only the common-sense view of autonomy as absence of dependence on the will of other subjects, but also one another.

The aspects of autonomy that women philosophers in this volume focus on to bring out this varied multi-layered concept are numerous, but we may highlight three of them here. First of all, there is the matter of education: none of us is born an autonomous individual; rather, a long and complex process of education at the hands of other people is needed to get us there. Secondly, one may think of familial and social relationships and the role they play in

developing our sense of autonomy, not only in the negative sense of an emancipation, but also in the positive sense of developing our personality, our system of preferences and needs, our life plans etc.: in short, the various pieces of what constitutes each of us as an autonomous subject. Last, there are the institutions: could we really be autonomous subjects if not in the framework of social and political institutions that, however, not only guarantee our rights, but also enforce our duties?

Even the hasty naming of these three aspects complicates the view of autonomy as absence of dependence. If, among others, education, relations, and institutions play an essential role in the development of autonomy, how could we conceive of this latter in purely negative terms as a lack of ties and dependences, as a situation in which my free will is all that counts? But, on the other hand, does it make sense (and what sense?) to speak of autonomy in a way that necessarily involves a dependence on other subjects, both individual and collective? Furthermore, we often use freedom and independence as almost equivalent with autonomy, but clearly, even though they are cognate concepts, they are not the same, and a clarification of the apparent contradictions of autonomy has to go through a clarification of its proximity and difference from those cognate concepts.

It would be unfair to expect from the essays contained in this volume a univocal, precise answer as to what autonomy should look like once we recover the women philosophers' voice. What on the contrary they manage to do, in our opinion, is to let this multi-layered character of autonomy emerge with its whole philosophical strength. They show that autonomy, both as a central philosophical concept and as a central dimension of real life, is not the result of a process of isolation and distillation, through which we create a space that is clear and separated from everything else. As a dimension of real life it is, rather, the product

of a delicate balance of several, not necessarily compliant factors. As a philosophical concept, autonomy is at the meeting point of different ideas and even areas, which do not allow clear-cut responses. The reformulation our volume proposes by putting women perspectives on the proscenium is hence more precisely a series of reformulations, though not in the sense of mutually exclusive, unrelated proposals. Our hope is rather that each of the essays be considered as a possible face of autonomy, and as a piece of a vivid, pluralistic discourse on it. The reader will find, in the perspectives of the philosophers here examined and in the approach of the authors of the papers, views ranging from enthusiastic re-appropriations of autonomy as a powerful emancipatory idea essential to the flourishing of women and men, to critical and skeptical evaluations of the concept, seen as yet another ideological tool or distortion aimed at keeping women and non-dominant groups in a condition of minority. We welcomed this broad theoretical span as yet another piece of evidence of the fertility and gap-bridging potential of the Recovery Project, and as a way of remapping the debate on autonomy by providing it with new, stimulating coordinates and orientations.

This collection proposes discussions of autonomy in and by women philosophers ranging from the Middle Ages to the 21st century. The fact that we do start in the 12th century, with Hildegard of Bingen, and then go through the 16th century, with Oliva Sabuco, the 17th century, with Madeleine de Scudery, Anne Conway, Margaret Cavendish, the 18th century with Olympe de Gouges, Macaulay and Wollstonecraft is evidence that we looked for conceptions of autonomy different from, though not necessarily incompatible with, the Kantian “invention” of morality as autonomy (see Schneewind 1998, 3). This does not mean that we reject Kantian autonomy as self-legislation of the subject under the moral law. However, as we suggested in the first half of this introduction, autonomy can mean many

different things in different philosophical contexts, and looking for it beyond Kant, before and after, is a way of depicting the richness of that concept.

By beginning in Chapter Two with Hildegard of Bingen in the 12th century, we do not mean to imply that autonomy as a concept did not exist until then. Indeed, autonomy played an important role in Plato's moral and political thought (Cohen 1993). Unfortunately, it is harder to find texts by women philosophers of that period – this is the reason for our medieval start. In her contribution on Hildegard of Bingen, Lerijs exposes the philosopher's surprisingly modern thought, arguing that autonomy for Hildegard of Bingen means not only being responsible for oneself morally, but also entails a form of inter-dependence, which requires humans to regard not only their own well-being as their personal responsibility, but also that of others, and of the environment.

Olivia Sabuco was a 16th century Spanish metaphysician whose work is only now beginning to come to light thanks to Mary Ellen Waithe's scholarship. In Chapter Three, Waithe presents Sabuco as arguing for political and religious autonomy under the watchful eye of the Spanish Inquisition through a rejection of a number of Aristotelian precepts about human nature. Waithe's discussion of Sabuco on autonomy takes us through different layers of that concept, which, for Sabuco, are interdependent. Personal and political autonomy is inferred from the emphasis she places on women's mental and physical health and from her account of a well-functioning republic. Sabuco argues for collectivist limits on personal autonomy when its exercise threatens the personal freedoms or welfare of others. The resulting discussion is rich philosophically but also gives us a fascinating glimpse into the life and personality of this hitherto unknown philosopher.

Andreas Blank, in Chapter Four, discusses the works of three 17th century philosophers: Madeleine de Scudéry, Jeanne-Michelle de Pringy, and Françoise d'Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon, arguing that their work on 'complaisance', the inclination to please socially, is in many ways a discussion of autonomy. The philosophical question which is central to all three women's discussion of complaisance is to what extent the social qualities which make (courtly) life pleasant or bearable are essentially in conflict with honesty, or with morality in general. Can one be socially acceptable and at the same time regain some sort of control on the morality of one's actions? The three philosophers Blank discusses come up with different answers to this question, each bringing out the complexity of making autonomy fit within a social context.

Margaret Cavendish lived at a time when claiming political autonomy could and did amount to revolutions and regicide. Like Hobbes, she was inclined to limit the very real damages of a civil war by strengthening the power of the monarch and lessening the autonomy of the subjects. Bergès, in Chapter Five, argues that there is more to this picture, however, and that Cavendish, reflecting on the condition of women, reached different conclusions from Hobbes as to the nature of freedom. Observing that for women autonomy was prevented as much by internal as by external obstacles, led her to the conclusion that autonomy depended partly on internal growth through education.

A contemporary of Cavendish, Anne Conway, was less interested in political philosophy than metaphysics and theology. Her complex system of substances can be read, Fiona Tomkinson tells us in Chapter Six, as a discussion of different kinds and levels of autonomy. For Conway, God, or the First Substance, is autonomous in the sense of being independent, but lacks the power to change in any way. Christ, the Second Substance, can change for the

better, but not the worse, whilst the Third Substance, consisting of ‘creatures’, including human beings, is fully autonomous in the sense of being capable of changing themselves in either direction, but not in the sense of being independent. Tomkinson then discusses contemporary eco-feminist scholarship on Conway and suggests how it may be enriched by a consideration of the questions of self-perfection and autonomy.

In chapter Seven, Alan Coffee argues that at least some women republican writers of the eighteenth century had developed a relational concept of personal and social freedom that anticipates and prefigures subsequent feminist critiques of individuated accounts of autonomy. Catharine Macaulay and, subsequently, Mary Wollstonecraft showed how human beings are inevitably embedded in an intricate set of social institutions, practices, and expectations that shaped their capacity to act. While everyone is influenced by their surroundings, it is women who suffer most given their subordinate social position. Using a modified form of what we would now refer to as freedom as non-domination, these writers maintained that unless the social background reflected women’s as well as men’s input and perspectives, women could not act autonomously.

In Chapter Eight, Martina Reuter, whose focus is also Wollstonecraft, discusses how Schneewind’s interpretation of the invention of autonomy would look different had it included a discussion of Wollstonecraft’s moral philosophy. Reuter takes into account in particular the gender dimension of Wollstonecraft’s discussion and how Wollstonecraft’s combination of egalitarian and perfectionist tendencies challenges the opposition Schneewind posits between these two aspects of moral philosophy. She looks in particular at the place of education in the development of autonomy, a topic that is largely overlooked by Schneewind. Reuter notes that the most significant elements of Wollstonecraft’s conception of autonomy

focus on questions of knowledge and education, so that in an important sense, Wollstonecraft's outlook is not unlike Kant's. Reuter concludes that had she engaged with Kant's work, Wollstonecraft would have almost certainly argued for his arguments to be extended to women.

Chapter Nine continues in the 18th century, but with an opening onto the 20th. Alberto Siani contrasts two feminist accounts of justice: that of revolutionary philosopher Olympe de Gouges and Susan Moller Okin's. Focusing on Gouges' Declaration of the Rights of Woman and on Okin's critique of Rawls, Siani suggests that Gouges and Okin are both reacting to a similar problem: the exclusion of the feminine perspective from philosophical (and political) debates about justice and rights. Gouges, he notes, attempts to solve this problem by replacing considerations of autonomy with those of social cohesion. Okin, Siani argues, achieves the same desired result while maintaining autonomy as a central goal for justice. His contribution offers a discussion of the contrast between these two responses.

Chapter Ten takes us into the nineteenth century, with Patrick Fessenbecker's discussion of how the novelist Mary Ward embraced the philosophy of British Idealist Thomas Hill Green, but also questioned his views about the necessary conditions for personal autonomy. This contribution reminds us of the importance of not limiting the genre of philosophical texts: not only did much philosophy get written in the form of novels or plays in the 17th, 18th and 19th century (Voltaire wrote plays, Rousseau novels and even an opera), but this was in particular the case for women philosophers, for whom it was harder to find acceptance as 'purely intellectual' writers (Scudéry, Cavendish, and Gouges are prime examples of philosophers who made use of literary genres).

With Chapter Eleven we move definitely into the 20th century. Hatice Karaman looks at the works of Helene Cixous and attempts to derive a philosophy of autonomy from Cixous's theory of 'écriture féminine', which argues that women must create their own autonomy by writing about themselves. This contribution is also a comment on the tendency of philosophy to dismiss some of its women members by calling them 'feminist theorists' rather than philosophers. Karaman challenges this tendency, as well as other canonical boundaries of philosophy, by reading the exchange between Cixous and Jacques Derrida not only in the light of the postmodernist topos of intertextuality, but also in that of Cixous' distinctive idea of intersexuality.

Chapter Twelve brings us into the domain of applied ethics and discusses the role played by personal autonomy as self-determination in Judith Jarvis Thomson's defense of abortion. Daniela Ringkamp, in this contribution, argues that Thomson fails to give a sufficient response to the 'responsibility' objection that argues that if a pregnancy is the (unintended) result of an autonomous act then the pregnant person has a responsibility to see through the pregnancy. On the other hand, Ringkamp shows that Thomson's violinist analogy points out important aspects of the woman's moral and physical involvement in a pregnancy and, in doing so, helps redefine the philosophical problem of abortion.

Chapter Thirteen focuses on the feminist existential phenomenology of Iris Marion Young. Martine Prange argues that Young's essay "Throwing like a girl" (1980) is an excellent starting-point for reflection on the bodily and social resistances female athletes experience in sports, based on its sophisticated account of 'the three modalities' of female movement due to which female athletes live a 'life in contradiction' between transcendence (freedom) and immanence (lack of freedom). However, Young's account triggers the questions of whether

transcendence can ever be achieved and, if so, how. Prange suggests that supplementing “Throwing like a Girl” with Young’s conceptual analysis developed in “Five Faces of Oppression” may help us understand which hindrances are on the road to freedom for female athletes. She claims that turning sports into a site of contestation and active resistance against hegemonic power is the key to the process of ‘de-gendering’.

The last chapter is a contribution by a contemporary scholar whose work on Kantian conceptions of autonomy is influential. Carla Bagnoli develops her view that there is a conceptual relation between autonomy, on the one hand, and emotional vulnerability, on the other. In previous works, she argued that autonomy must be understood in relational terms, and here she explores ways in which emotions contribute to agential autonomy. Her point is that emotional vulnerability is functional to agential autonomy, and her case rests on the examination of emotions that arise in contexts of mutual dependency, such as love and shame. Thus, Bagnoli’s contribution ties in with the first chapter on Hildegard von Bingen, reminding us that human beings are not by nature independent, but inter-dependent, so that a working concept of autonomy has to take into consideration the multiple ways in which we relate to each other.

Cohen, David. 1993. “Law, Autonomy, and Political Community in Plato’s Laws.” *Classical Philology* 88 (4): 301–17. <https://doi.org/10.1086/367373>.

Schneewind, Jerome B. *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*, 1998.