

LOVE, POLITICS, AND AUTONOMY

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RECENT ANGLO-AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY has seen a resurgence of interest in the ethics and psychology of personal relations, and books and articles with such titles as *Friendship, Altruism and Morality*, *Philosophy and Personal Relations*, and “Servility and Self-Respect” abound.¹ Two disparate developments have acted as catalyst for this turn: the discovery of Aristotelian ethics by analytic philosophers, and the politics and philosophy of feminism. The subject of this paper is one aspect of the latter.

It is easy to see why feminism should spark an interest in the philosophical study of personal relations; for feminism has always been born (and it has been born more than once) “from a recognition of personal oppression and injustice,”² an oppression and injustice fostered and justified by theories of inferior female nature and virtue. But this time around, the examination of the psychological prerequisites of healthy personal relations, and especially of healthy romantic love, has resulted in a startling phenomenon in academic philosophy—an explicit and self-conscious rejection of the ethics of self-sacrifice as an ethics that is incompatible with self-respect and autonomy and thereby, ultimately, destructive of genuine love.

This theme is of course familiar to readers of novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand (whose contribution is, deplorably, *not* acknowledged by these writers), but it is revolutionary in academic philosophy. Unfortunately, the same writers who emphasize autonomy and the morality of “proper” self-love in the personal realm also for the most part advocate statism—a political philosophy of sacrifice and coercion—as a means to this end. This, of course, is a blatant contradiction: as libertarian feminists have pointed out, exchanging the oppression of husbands and fathers for that of the state is hardly an advance on the road of liberation.³

How, then, can feminists endorse such a position? One obvious answer is that the actual *loss* of autonomy entailed by state intervention in the marketplace is indirect and distant, whereas the (no doubt ephemeral) *gain* is direct and immediate. If I can turn to a “free” child-care agency to feed and play with my child, I am immediately freed to pursue my career interests but only mediately constrained by the prohibitive costs of the university degree that is necessary (thanks, no doubt, to the “public conscience” of someone who sought to preserve “professional standards” through legislative fiat...) for promotion from psychometrist to psychologist. Further, I know—and know “by acquaintance”—what the “free” agency frees me of, but I may forever remain in blissful ignorance of the causal chain running from other such “free” agencies (for which I, likewise unaware, am paying), to my inability to pay for a course, for want of which I lose out on the degree, for want of which I lose out on the promotion, for want of which I lose out on the money, for want of which I clamor for more “free” agencies...

An important task of libertarian writers is to make such causal chains salient, and indeed arguments addressed specifically to women’s issues have started appearing in the literature.⁴ Such arguments and studies should serve to combat yet another reason for this outré alliance of a philosophy of personal freedom with the political philosophy of unfreedom—the fact that the women’s movement has always adopted the political ideology of the times, and it is welfare statism, not classical liberalism, that is the prevailing political ideology.⁵

The relevance of libertarianism to the contemporary women’s movement is obvious not just when we consider the defects of that movement, which libertarianism alone can repair, but also when we consider its merits: its emphasis on the autonomy and the mind-body integrity of the person. This essentially this-worldly, Aristotelian principle brings feminism closer to the philosophical spirit and foundation of libertarianism than to any other putative liberation movement.⁶

But if, from the ontology of the individual as a self-determining, embodied entity with the moral right to pursue his or her own happiness, it is a straight route to the ethics of political and economic liberty, then it is likely that what has sidetracked feminism from this route and led it, instead, up the garden path to statism is a fault in the analysis of this ontology itself. A libertarian critique of feminist statism must address itself to this basic level in addition to the economic level.⁷

I shall here examine just one aspect of this ontology, namely, the view of the individual as autonomous, in the context of the theory of socialization adopted by feminists as an account of our cognitive and moral development. An examination of this account is important for two reasons: (1) it is the foundation for the illegitimate notion of coercion employed by feminists, which notion naturally leads to, and

justifies, their advocacy of programs of social and economic state intervention; (2) it contains, nevertheless, an important element of truth that is usually overlooked or denied by libertarians on the mistaken belief that granting it will commit them to accepting this false notion of coercion. The result, however, is a weakening of the libertarian position insofar as this denial of an intuitively insistent truth is seen as essential to its defense.

A central idea of the socialization thesis, an idea that is commonsensical enough despite the technical vocabulary, is that our social institutions, and particularly the family, play a crucial role in the definition of our selfhood, the beliefs and attitudes we acquire regarding the values we ought to pursue, the virtues we ought to inculcate, and their proper expression. So, for example, what we regard as appropriate and desirable expressions of concern or love for others, and as our legitimate expectations of them, is learned through paradigm cases of such concern and caring shown by parents and spouses. But these paradigms (inevitably?) exemplify these attitudes and traits in distorted or harmful forms, so that concern and compassion in women come to be “associated with negative qualities such as dependence, sense of inferiority, and self-denial, instead of, as they ought to be, with positive qualities such as autonomy and independence.”⁸ In the post-*Feminine Mystique* era—not to mention the post-*Fountainhead* era—it is easy to recognize the truth of this contention.⁹

However, we are also told that these negative qualities are not simply individual psychological traits but “an integral part of the social structure to which women are relegated in our society, in which they are generally denied independence, and thus actually are dependent on their parents, brothers, husbands, sons.” It follows that “the structure of marriage is a relationship in which women are objectively dependent and which also causes the individual woman’s emotional make-up to be characterized by dependence.” The authors emphasize that “it is the institution of marriage and the socialization of women which brings about such a situation, and not a defect in the individual person.”¹⁰

What are we to make of this? Taken in its entirety, it is clearly a statement of social determinism and denial of moral responsibility for one’s character and actions, a view wholly incompatible with the metaphysical and ethical foundations of libertarianism. It is also clearly incompatible with the actual moral beliefs and practices of people (including feminists in real life).

Nevertheless, I believe that it builds on an element of truth that is perfectly compatible with the thesis of self-determination and responsibility but is usually denied by libertarians seduced by statements of what I shall call Super Freedom. A prime example of such a statement is psychologist Nathaniel Branden’s otherwise eloquent and inspiring declaration: “Of any value offered to him as the right, and any asser-

tion offered to him as the true, a man is free to ask: *Why?* That ‘Why?’ is the threshold that the beliefs of others cannot cross without his consent.”¹¹

I believe that this is entirely true so long as the freedom referred to is taken in the *metaphysical* sense: the capacity or potential to choose what we shall “make our own.” But it is not *entirely* true when freedom is taken in the *psychological power* sense: the ability, at any given time, to *actualize* this potential. This, I submit, is *not* always wholly up to us but may be in part a function of external factors (external, that is, to our characters, so that our own purely physical states, and not merely that which belongs in our social or physical environment, would count as external in this sense). An example will help clarify the distinction: a person retains the *potential* or capacity for freedom even while asleep or heavily drugged, but the ability to actualize this potential approaches zero in these states. Common sense and psychological studies both suggest that even while awake, and fully conscious, the power to actualize this potential cannot always be fully adequate to one’s environment.

To explain with the help of an analogy: when we use our eyesight, we have to focus on some thing(s) in our environments to the exclusion of others; such selectivity is necessary for the achievement of any coherent vision at all. At the same time, what is out of visual focus is not thereby completely out of sight: our brains register sights without our consent, sights that we can recall when the occasion demands. Similarly, in critically attending to some idea(s) presented to us in books or conversations, we necessarily exclude others from our mental focus. But these others are not thereby denied entry into our minds: our subconscious minds can and do pick up beliefs and attitudes without our consent. It is an all-too-common—and singularly chastening—experience for daughters-turned-mothers to find themselves sounding or behaving like their mothers, *even in ways they had both consciously and emotionally rejected and deplored*. (Once caught, of course, such behavior can be monitored and changed, but this is another matter.) Again, to take a more humdrum example, we know only too well how songs we never listen to, and may dislike to boot, have a way of lodging themselves in our brains.

In the light of such data, there doesn’t seem to be any reason for denying that individuals *can* sometimes pick up certain negative traits and attitudes from their culture, without the awareness necessary for examining their worth, where such lack of awareness is not evasion; that is, it is not motivated by fear or inertia or, for that matter, any other motive but is simply a natural condition of a being whose powers, like the powers of any other natural being, are finite.¹² Nor is a person always blameworthy when he or she knowingly cultivates a negative trait such as some form of dependency; for the person may honestly though mistakenly believe that it is (a sign of) a virtue.¹³ And such mistakes are especially likely when we are in fact dependent on

another person economically and socially, so that our goals have to take second place to his or hers.¹⁴

None of this, of course, supports the feminist contention that we are *caused* by our environment to be dependent, etc. On this view, there can be no difference between adopting a belief or value subconsciously and adopting it critically. And there can be no possibility of changing it when we become aware of it.¹⁵

This last lands the feminists in a dilemma: theoretical consistency (consistency with their theory of social determinism) demands that they assert this. But practical consistency demands that they deny it; for it contradicts the fact and point of their attempts to raise consciousness through writing and women's groups. So they sort of assert-it-and-deny-it: consciousness-raising groups, we are told, "have enabled individual women to discover caring with autonomy." But we are also told, on the same page, that "the women's group can aid its members to see that their problem cannot be solved by personal change or in the isolated sphere of the group."¹⁶ Determinist feminists both admit the possibility of individual change—of change that transcends social structures—and deny it.

Their worst philosophical fault, however, is their failure to see that by rejecting autonomy in the metaphysical sense, they undercut the logical basis of the autonomy they call for in the psychological power sense. If all our beliefs and desires are determined by our social environment, then the distinction between *independence* and *dependence* becomes vacuous.

This metaethical view has predictable political consequences. It leads to a definition of coercion that cuts across the distinction between speech and action and justifies, ultimately, programs of political suppression of free speech.

Thus, in a discussion of consent and coercion, Judith Tormey divides coercion into two kinds: "(a) cases where the coercion is an overt form of force [a gun at one's head; the threat of starvation] and (b) cases where the coercion is covert and more difficult to detect [the shaping of one's beliefs about oneself, for example]."¹⁷ The "coercive," or oppressive, device Tormey is concerned with here is the morality of self-sacrifice.¹⁸

Feminists justify their advocacy of the censorship of pornography by denying that such restriction is a suppression of free *speech*. And indeed, if pornography "is a powerful agent of socialization" that "fosters acts of violence against women" and thus "constitutes a *threat to one's physical safety and emotional well being*,"¹⁹ they have both logic and morality on their side when they insist that its suppression *is not an issue of free speech*.

But if pornography, then why not other "oppressive devices"—such as the morality of self-sacrifice, which "forces" women into inferior social positions by "making" them form false beliefs about themselves, which in turn render them "incapable" of taking advan-

tage of alleged equal opportunities? Such oppression is, after all, “a special form of enslavement...differentiated from other forms of enslavement [only] by the fact that the force of coercion involved operates on psychological as opposed to physical states.”²⁰

And now that the psychological-physical distinction no longer serves to distinguish persuasion or influence from coercion or enslavement, how are we to distinguish between the two? There can be only one answer: a belief is freely formed, a value is freely acted upon, only when these are (what the feminists regard as) *true* beliefs and *good* values. In a society of *such* free individuals, what need is there for the shallow negative rights of free speech and exchange that make a political community an untidy plurality?

So we reach the political dead-end of a metaphysics of environmental determinism: self-respect and autonomy must be construed as *wholly* a matter of holding certain beliefs and values, with *no* connection to *how* we come to hold them—that is, whether as a result of our own honest practical reasoning or as a result of a surrender to the minds of others whatever the motive.²¹ And when they are thus defined, self-respect and autonomy become compatible with total political control.

It would be unjust to claim that total political control is the desire or aim of most statist feminists, even of those who explicitly put forth a theory of social determinism.²² But the logic of our ideas can coax our desires and aims to fall in line with the conclusions that follow willy-nilly from our premises. Is it any surprise, then, that feminists have gone from advocating censorship on grounds of physical danger to advocating it in the interests of a “decent society?”²³ After all, if enslavement may be spiritual as well as physical, and the bad and the false (the indecent) enslave us, then removal of the indecent, even when it poses no physical danger (real or imagined), can only free us.²⁴

Ironically, the feminist world picture of helpless women victimized by oppressive sexist institutions has become self-confirming, insofar as it has created what Jean Elshtain calls “the victim syndrome.” In her article by the same title she presents statistics from the FBI and from the Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Statistics to show that women’s perceptions of themselves as the chief victims of violent crime—and the ever more likely victims—are “startlingly out of proportion to the actual threat.”²⁵ Not women but young men have been and are the most victimized group.²⁶ Women are becoming the most victimized group, not of a violently sexist society, but of their own “victim ideology.” This bodes ill for a program of restoring autonomy to individuals so that they may join together in mutual love and respect.

Aristotle’s remarks on friendship and political association, and his related criticism of Plato’s ideal society, are significant in this context. It is friendship, he says, rather than law, that holds states together. But friendship and justice have the same extension, so that “each of

the constitutions may be seen to involve friendship just insofar as it involves justice."²⁷ Elsewhere Aristotle tells us that the individual must exercise his own practical reason if he is to be virtuous and happy.²⁸ And since the state exists for *eudaimonia*,²⁹ we can infer that the just state will allow individuals the freedom to make and follow their own choices and plans. It is in such a state, a state inhabited by humans who are free and equal, that friendship will best flourish. True unity is a result of plurality. If friendship, justice, and peace are the aim of the state, it must be and remain a plurality, a *plethos*.

A state with the kind of unity that Plato envisages—the unity of one mind and will, that of the guardians—is, in the first instance, impossible. But even were it possible, it would be undesirable. For it would destroy the freedom and equality that are necessary for friendship.³⁰

Feminists who declare so easily that “the personal is political”—and nowhere more than in the sexual love of man and woman³¹—would do well to reflect on these remarks.

1. L. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); Alan Montefiore, ed., *Philosophy and Personal Relations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973); T. E. Hill, “Servility and Self-Respect,” in *Rights*, ed. David Lyons (California: Wordsworth, 1979).

2. Carolyn W. Korsmeyer, “Reason and Morals in the Early Feminist Movement: Mary Wollstonecraft,” in *Women and Philosophy*, ed. Carol C. Gould and Marx W. Wartofsky (New York: G. P. Putnam’s, 1976), p. 97.

3. Sharon Presley and Lynn Kinsky, “Government Is Women’s Enemy,” Association of Libertarian Feminists Discussion Paper, (New York, 1976, 1979).

4. Thus Joan K. Taylor’s “The Welfare Mystique” (*Inquiry*, Nov. 1982), which presents evidence for the thesis that welfare programs have actually led to greater poverty and a narrowing of women’s horizons.

5. Korsmeyer, “Reason and Morals,” notes that “as women became conscious of and actively dissatisfied with their place in the social order, their oppression as they perceived it was explained in the context of the prevailing ideas of the time, and, accordingly, prescription for change mirrored much contemporary political philosophy as well” (p. 97).

6. I am aware that some libertarians do not subscribe to the thesis of autonomy. Thus, in “What Means This Freedom?” John Hospers argues for a form of psychological determinism. Nevertheless, I believe that the notion of the self-determining individual is a necessary metaphysical foundation for the ethics and politics of liberty.

7. Unfortunately, I have been unable to obtain Sharon Presley’s seminal “Libertarianism and Feminism,” referred to in Taylor’s “Welfare Mystique.” So I do not know what has already been done in this area.

8. L. Blum et al., “Altruism and Women’s Oppression,” in *Women and Philosophy*, ed. Gould and Wartofsky, p. 223.

9. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963); Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York, 1943).

10. Blum et al. “Altruism and Women’s Oppression,” pp. 229, *Ibid.*, p. 231, 236. I should note here that not all feminists subscribe to the social-determinist view. Friedan in *Feminine Mystique* discusses at some length the importance of accepting responsibility for one’s character and actions, while acknowledging the influence of society’s institutions and values.

11. Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1969), p. 47.

12. Arguing against Branden's Super Freedom Thesis is a tricky proposition, because he never addresses himself to the possibility of this kind of subconscious learning, hence never gives any reasons for his (implicit) rejection of it. He (and other libertarians who agree with him) assume without discussion that a rejection of social determinism entails an acceptance of Super Freedom.
13. Louisa May Alcott's struggles against her pride and temper, in an attempt to develop the womanly virtues of humility and sweet-temperedness, are a dramatic example of the mistaken associations a woman can make under the influence of her culture. It does not seem to have occurred to her that her irrepressible temper may well have been the result of her vain attempt to subdue her well-earned pride in her courage and intelligence.
14. Compare Aristotle on moral education: "We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1). Common experience amply demonstrates the influence of physical states and acts in general on mental states: *acting* calmly can induce an inner calm; "whistling a happy tune, whenever you feel afraid," cuts into your fear; vigorous physical activity reduces depression.
15. It should be clear from this and following considerations that my claim that we can pick up beliefs and values subconsciously cannot be assimilated to the social-determinist view. Hence it cannot be used to support the feminist claim that the social environment is a coercive agency. I am aware, though, that to adequately defend my contentions on this matter, much more needs to be said than is possible in a paper of this length.
16. Blum et al. "Altruism and Women's Oppression," p. 243.
17. Judith Farr Tormey, "Exploitation, Oppression and Self-Sacrifice," in *Women and Philosophy*, ed. Gould and Wartofsky, p. 214. Brackets in original.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
19. A representative of the New York City branch of Women Against Pornography (WAP), quoted in Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The Victim Syndrome: A Troubling Turn in Feminism," *Progressive* (June 1982), pp. 44, 43.
20. Tormey, "Exploitation," pp. 216, 217.
21. The issue of the relationship of self-respect to autonomy, and of these to the objective validity and worth of our beliefs and desires on the one hand and to the cognitive route whereby we arrive at them on the other, is an important but complicated one. For now it must suffice to note that neither condition by itself is sufficient for guaranteeing self-esteem and autonomy (although, perhaps, neither can exist to any significant degree without the other).
22. Methodologically, too, it is no more justified to use a contradiction in someone's position to deny its positive content (in this case, the phenomenologically valuable analysis of autonomy-with-caring), than to use it to deny its negative content.
23. See Nat Hentoff, *The New Legions of Erotic Decency*, Cato Institute (Washington, D.C., 1979).
24. In a recent incident, the political power of "persuasive definitions" brought the Metro Police to the lobby of a University of Toronto building to remove a student anti-abortion display on grounds of its "obscenity." The Graduate Students' Union President declared that the action was not an infringement of free speech.
25. Elshtain, "Victom Syndrome," p. 42.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
27. *Nicomachean Ethics* 8. 1, 2.
28. *NE* 6. 2.
29. *Politics* 3. 9.
30. *Politics* 2. 1261^{aff}.
31. Elizabeth Rapaport, "On the Future of Love: Rousseau and the Radical Feminists," in *Women and Philosophy*, ed. Gould and Wartofsky, p. 185.