Courage, Self-Trust, and Self-Defence

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Recounting a difficult situation in which an abused woman considers returning to her marriage after her husband tried to choke her to death, bell hooks tells of how she gave the woman a copy of Lenore Walker's *The Battered Woman*, hoping that reading the book would "give her the courage to confront the reality of her situation" (hooks 1989, 88). Realizing that the abused woman's self-esteem was greatly attacked, that she had lost a sense of her own worth and value, hooks was troubled with the worry of how this woman could recover her ability to move beyond the sense that she should just forget the incident, remain silent, and return to her marriage. Cases like this illustrate that experiencing trauma as a victim of personal violence undermines agency and impedes the recovery of autonomy. Susan Brison's (1999) account illuminates how a sense of physical powerlessness, low self-esteem, self-blame, helplessness or shame undermine autonomy in the aftermath of personal violence. How might one respond to these sorts of challenges to autonomy?

Traditional accounts of autonomy cannot provide much of an answer to the question, for their focus relies on depicting the body as an instrument of the will; if the will is autonomous then the body acts autonomously as an expression of one's agency. Here we do not learn how to improve our prospects for autonomy by working with our bodily capacities, vulnerabilities, or exigencies. In contrast, feminist accounts of autonomy recognize that the capacity for autonomy hinges on context and circumstances that include the body, accounting for this complexity through allowing for degrees of autonomy. Most notably, Diana Meyers argues for the view that possessing certain autonomy competencies serve to develop autonomy. What competencies might promote one's capacity to develop autonomy under the threat of personal violence? Does developing autonomy require courage, as bell hooks suggests? I aim to explore these questions, situating emotions and attitudes within an account of autonomy so as to show how one might counter limits to autonomy due to threat of personal violence. It will be my aim to show that cultivating skills of self-defence provides a means of developing autonomy, particularly for those who belong to groups targeted with personal violence.

The capacity of self-defence is one persons generally possess, the ability to protect oneself against harms to the self. Possessing the *skill* of self-defence requires the development of that capacity, such that persons are able to protect themselves from harms by employing specific skills acquired through repeated training over time. One class in self-defence does not produce a skill of self-defence, but neither need one train for years in order to be skilled. One may be said to possess this skill when one is judged by senior experts as capable of defending oneself in training exercises and tests. The skill of self-defence is not simply constituted by possessing a repertoire of physical skills, however.

During self-defence training, one also acquires other related skills, including judgements, attitudes, emotional dispositions, and other responses suited to successfully executing physical techniques in response to perceived threats. We can perhaps envision the complementary nature of both sorts of skills through picturing a traditional martial arts class, which at its best aims to instil attitudes appropriate to physical self-defence training such as respect, confidence, pride (but not arrogance), tranquillity of mind and resolution of purpose. Self-defence classes abstracted from their martial art background including such elements of training will also qualify as promoting the skill of self-defence I am discussing in this paper.

I maintain that we can see a direct, positive relationship between self-defence training and increased skills of autonomy. The capacity to act on one's values and beliefs, to act on that which one considers morally or politically important, or even important to one's own identity is, I will argue, partly a function of one's resolve to take a stand before others and to resist others' demands against the self. To see how self-defence training develops autonomy, we must first recognize the relationship between autonomy and the body.

Feminist autonomy theorists account for the embodied nature of autonomy by acknowledging the body as a site for suffering *constraints* on autonomy. Oppressive social norms and ideals most notably restrict autonomy through bodily imposed limits to free agency. For instance, traditional Western socialization expects women to be passive and non-confrontational, small and delicate. Women's physical positioning and movement is expected to take up as little space as possible, resulting in cramped postures and mincing steps. In effect, women are to participate in diminishing or erasing their physical presence, making no demands on the surrounding environment, issuing no complaint in their allocated physical roles. This fits into "a network of behaviors through which we constantly announce to others our membership in a lower caste and our unwillingness and/or inability to defend our bodily or moral integrity. It is degrading and a pattern of degradation" (Frye 1983, 16).

Diana Meyer's (1987, 1989, 2004) account of autonomy explains why persons living in accordance with oppressive ideals suffer from diminished autonomy. On Meyers' account, the skills permitting autonomy are coordinated skills of introspection, imagination, reasoning, and volition. Autonomy competency is just the ability to exercise such skills in formation and exercise of choices within the context of one's life plans. As a competency, autonomy is compromised if the skills needed for autonomy are undermined. Like other competencies, autonomy is exercised to a matter of degree. The degree to which one possesses autonomy hinges partly on the range in which one exercises choice. One may have pockets of one's life within which one exercises autonomy, while having other areas in which one lacks autonomy. To express autonomy over one's life as a whole, persons must "be ready to resist the unwarranted demands of other individuals along with conformist societal pressures, and... be resolved to carry out their own plans" (Meyers 1987, 627).

In what follows I focus on these two core autonomy competencies, the capacity to resist untoward demands of the self and the resolution to carry out one's plans. If one must exercise autonomy competencies to exercise autonomy, and if autonomy requires resistance and resolution, then one must be competent to exercise the capacities of resistance and resolution to possess autonomy in its fullest sense. Just these two competencies are undermined in the case of women's socialization in passivity. Women who unreflectively endorse traditional Western feminine ideals are thereby limited in their capacity for autonomy. Ideals of passivity and compliance are reflected in the body, so there is a sense in which these ideals are encoded in the body. We can speak of such limits to autonomy as *bodily encoded limits* to autonomy.

Cases of physical abuse illustrate bodily limits to autonomy that are reflected in a compromised ability to resist threats to the self, or to resolve to act in one's own best interest in light of perceived harms for doing so. Women worldwide live under threat of personal violence,

although the degree to which that threat is present may vary greatly between regions. The key defining feature of oppression is that, in virtue of belonging to a particular group, one faces systematic limitations, barriers, and harms (Frye 1983). Women are oppressed by this threat of personal violence because it imposes limits to autonomy, throws barriers in the way of women's self-determination, and is intrinsically harmful. Here, the two core autonomy competencies of resolution and resistance are further undermined through traditional feminine socialization in passivity. Resistance in the face of adversity and the resolution to carry out one's plans in spite of any possible resistance both appear to require courage, so perhaps bell hooks is right to suggest that courage might enable the battered woman to leave her abusive relationship. Is courage what is needed to develop the above two core autonomy competencies under threat of personal violence?

Courageous persons possess the sort of judgement and motivation enabling them to resolutely act on their commitments, thus these persons appear ready to resist counter forces, at least if the level of risk does not demand otherwise. But some people possess minimal courage, or possess it only sporadically. Those who are frequently uncertain about what to do, when to act, how to do it, and so forth, because of fear of perceived dangers or threats, would not appear to possess courage. Perhaps too, those who are *certain* as to what do to, but who balk at acting, make excuses or otherwise are overcome by fears and uncertainty are also not courageous. We can see from these examples that lacking courage is evidenced in caving in to circumstances regardless of whether one is certain as to what to do: having certainty is not the same as having the sort of resolve associated with courage. In either case, we can see that lacking courage undermines resistance to countervailing concerns because, by its very nature, lacking courage entails giving in to pressures against oneself.

If it is correct that courage is required for resolve and resistance, then those in need of enhanced autonomy require the development of courage. Courage is commonly understood as either an emotion or a dispositional character trait. If courage is understood as an emotion, then it appears that those lacking it have no hope of producing courage when it is needed most or, perhaps, at any time at all. This is because, as Hume famously remarks, one cannot will an emotion into existence (1978, 439). If courage is a dispositional or character trait, and one happens to lack that habitual motive, then another difficulty appears. It is a notorious problem of virtue ethics to explain how persons can come to possess virtues they currently lack. For those who do not happen to have courage, the exercise of autonomy competency would seem to be undermined in a debilitating way if it is correct that these persons will not have the basic capacities of resistance and resolution essential to the possession and exercise of autonomy.

What then, besides trying to develop courage, can one do in the aim of furthering one's capacities for resolve and resistance? This question is especially pressing for members of oppressed groups, for such persons routinely face obstacles and threats to autonomous action; it is precisely these sorts of persons who need most of all to be ready to resolve to act in spite of hegemonic forces or to outright resist them. The dangers of resisting or countering oppressive forces can be severe, and the risk is more keenly evident to some persons more than others. Gay men may be more aware of it than lesbians, for instance, while women with disabilities may be more aware of it than others. The amount of risk alone may be enough for some to avoid counter-responses or resistance to oppressive practices. And for those who *do* respond, if they do not sufficiently consider the risk they may place themselves in significant danger, such that which might appear courageous is in fact rash.

The ability to act on one's values and beliefs, to act on that which one considers morally or politically important, or even important to one's own identity, is in no small way a function of one's confidence that one can take a stand without the threat of personal violence. We have seen and will continue to see women and other oppressed groups join forces in taking stands against oppressive practices, social, legal, or political. Support of communities sharing ideals and values can be integral to taking a stand for oneself in a very concrete way. There is safety

in numbers, so long as persons are respected and not jailed, harassed, or attacked for their protests as members of those groups. But if part of a targeted group, or if isolated from support or otherwise alone, persons should still have the ability to exercise autonomy without fear of damaging reprisal. I maintain that self-defence training enables one to exercise and develop the capacities of resistance and resolution essential to autonomy competency. It does this through developing a self-confidence rooted in the body that is itself a form of trust in one's ability to protect and defend one's self. That self-confidence is a key source of the resolution to act and motivation to resist obstacles or threats to one's autonomous action.

Learning self-defence promotes autonomy through developing two positive self-regarding attitudes, self-trust and self-esteem. Trudy Govier's (1993) account of trust captures the idea that a sense of one's own basic competence and worth is central to self-trust: it is a matter of self-trust whether or not "one can depend on oneself to carry through decisions and act on one's values in difficult situations" (107). Self-trust is trust in one's own resources to respond to challenges, to respond appropriately and with good judgement. On Govier's account, self-trust is demonstrated negatively, revealed by insecurity and self-doubt that one does not trust oneself to do or refrain from doing certain actions (106). We can add to this that self-trust is also revealed by confidence in what one *can* do, as illustrated in self-defence training.

Learning to defend oneself requires the execution of repeated physical exercises that develop techniques such as blocks, strikes, or evasion manoeuvres. Students of self-defence repeatedly practice such physical techniques in the aim of perfecting them to produce the most efficient, appropriate, and immediate responses to commonly used attacks. These physical techniques are not well motivated out of fear, anger, hatred, or other similar emotions. Rather, such techniques are best performed with a tranquil and clear mind that is capable of calmly and quickly assessing an incoming physical attack and responding to it. The motivational responses one acquires through self-defence training often translate into areas of life outside of the training hall. Simply possessing the calmness and alertness of mind developed through self-defence training can indicate to potential attackers that they do not have the usual sort of target; this may in itself prevent an assault. Indeed, much of self-defence training aims to produce skills allowing one to avoid or prevent assaults before they occur.

Confidence in oneself to respond to threats towards one's bodily integrity is a form of self-trust, namely the trust one has in one's ability to protect one's self against harm. This self-trust is developed through self-defence training: through the process of learning to defend oneself and subsequent testing and retesting of that ability, one gains confidence in one's skills of self-defence. One then trusts that in actual threatening situations, one will have the same sorts of responses one has in the training hall. Self-trust here is revealed in degrees, varying more or less according to the situations with which one is faced. Confronted with situations most obviously threatening to oneself, one has a heightened awareness of one's confidence in one's ability to protect oneself -- or lack thereof. This is a bodily rooted trust in one's training, but it is not limited to trust in one's physical command of specifically learned techniques. Because both physiological and psychological elements of the body come together in self-defence training, the trust developed is self-trust in its widest possible sense: one trusts that one's emotional, attitudinal and physical responses will come together to enable one to defend oneself if required.

Trusting one's ability to avoid or prevent harms to oneself with skill and good judgement requires a certain degree of self-esteem. Govier draws a picture of the self-esteem essential to self-trust as consisting of basic self-acceptance, a non-comparative, internally held view that one is fundamentally a worthy and adequate person (1993, 113). On Govier's view, the autonomous person has such self-esteem and so is capable of critically reflecting upon and questioning those around her. If one does not believe one's competencies and judgements are sound or effective, then one lacks self-esteem. Such deficiencies in self-esteem are reflected in diminished self-trust. Deficiencies in either self-trust or

self-esteem restrict one's autonomy competency, the ability to make autonomous decisions and act on them. Autonomous persons' actions depend on their own standpoint, and from that standpoint persons regard themselves as not only able to respond to the various expectations others may have of themselves, but *worthy* of so responding (Benson 1994 p.662). As acquiring self-trust through learning self-defence suggests, this idea can be widened to encompass the view that possessing the confidence to respond as one expects *oneself* to do is integral to autonomy.

Experiencing another's' anger or agitation may be enough to silence those who fear further repercussions. The ability to remain strong in the face of adversity and to calmly maintain one's position is a result of one's self-trust to respond well to such challenges. While this ability often flourishes without self-defence skills, possessing these skills generates an added reservoir of confidence upon which one may draw if in doubt as to whether one will receive subsequent threats of physical or sexual harms. Many persons, especially those attuned to heightened threat of physical harm as a member of an oppressed group, will have a heightened need to withstand or avoid a physical assault on the self. This is so familiar as to appear self-evident to such persons, who are aware of the frequency with which others' intimidating or threatening postures, words, or actions may turn into physical assaults on the self. Thus, even if faced with verbal threats or simply another's anger, persons who are wary of subsequent psychological or physical assault would do well to have self-defence skills. Much regretted compromise or alteration of one's values, beliefs, or principles results as a response to the perceived possibility of harms to the self if one were to resist or counter another's attitudes, opinions, or expectations.

The self-confidence produced through self-defence training is a significant source of the resolution to act to defend oneself and of the motivation to resist such threats to the self. Through self-defence training one develops confidence not only that one can execute specific physical techniques but that one will also possess the motivational wherewithal to successfully perform those techniques, even under pressing circumstances. Those who are prepared to resist counterforces to the self have cultivated the spirit to act resolutely. Since both resolution and resistance are key autonomy competencies, the self-confidence produced through self-defence training promotes autonomy. Below, I consider three different challenges to this account.

First, the self-confidence I have described might be taken as a form of courage. For instance, it might seem courageous to both perceive a threat of harm to the self and to take appropriate action to avoid or forestall that harm. However, I am not convinced that such a description offers an adequate account of courage. Certainly it is inadequate if courage is best described as an emotional or dispositional motive to act in such ways. Motives for action should not be confused with the action itself. So just because one might describe an action as courageous does not entail courageous motives. Without settling on whether or not actions of self-defence are courageous, we can still recognize that acting in self-defence promotes self-trust in the form of self-confidence. That self-confidence meets the two essential components of autonomy competency, namely the capacities of resistance and resolution. Resolving to maintain one's life, one's physical or sexual integrity, or one's identity are key examples of what one might resolve to protect and maintain. Resistance may in some cases might call for whatever it takes to prevent harms the self. While we would expect that most threats to the self are not directly physical threats, possessing the capacity to defend oneself physically is one good way of developing the capacity to appropriately respond to non-physical threats to the self.

Second, one might consider it a problem to hold that self-defence promotes autonomy for the main reason that acts of self-defence are exemplary models of nonautonomous action, right alongside involuntary jerks and starts. A key part of self-defence training is developing the ability to respond quickly, immediately, and without forethought to a certain sort of attack technique. So, self-defence training involves

learning how to physically replicate the exact same movement precisely and spontaneously. But here, spontaneity need not deny autonomy. The body may demonstrate one's autonomous choices without any *immediately* preceding willing or desiring, but that does not entail that one does not endorse the motives for such actions. Acts that are autonomously chosen but spontaneously enacted are still autonomous, it would seem. Even if these acts are not autonomously chosen in advance, one may reflectively endorse them as appropriate skills to possess. This view is consistent with a procedural view of autonomy: procedural accounts privilege critical reflection in holding that autonomy proceeds to a matter of degree correlative to one's ongoing process of self-reflection (Barclay 2000). Recall Meyers' view of autonomy that autonomy may be possessed to a matter of degree, in different areas of one's life. Given this account of autonomy, even if we admit that spontaneity undermines autonomy in some ways, it does not entail that one is nonautonomous. Even if some acts of self-defence are nonautonomous, it need not undermine the theory presented here, for that in itself does not suggest that motives of resolve or resistance are somehow undermined as autonomy competencies.

Third, in appealing to the centrality of resolve and resistance on an account of autonomy, I might seem to be promoting an individualist conception of autonomy. That is, promoting these two autonomy competencies might suggest an ideal of protecting and defending the self without any assistance from other persons or groups. Don't we have police forces, concerned citizens, caring friends and relatives, and other such avenues of public protection available to us? While not exactly vigilante justice, some may consider my view one of vigilante autonomy. This might be a negative description, were it the case that public systems of protection actually *do* protect individuals from harms such as sexual harassment, sexual assaults, muggings, killings, even threatening words, behaviours or postures. Persons belonging to groups oppressed by personal violence often engage in evasive actions as part of a daily routine, including but not limited to: strategically parking cars or planning walking and bus routes, arranging companions for travelling, attending to type and style of clothing and shoes, or purchasing security alarms or systems, guns, pepper spray, whistles, or guard-dogs. This is the backdrop against which daily life is played out, with such preparations aiming to protect against the possibility of assault on the self. Given that sort of life, a concept of vigilante autonomy may be a positive thing. It holds that one has the self-respect to be committed to and responsible for one's autonomy even in the face of oppressive forces.

Protecting and developing autonomous agency requires a conception of one's own self-worth. Without a conception of whom one is becoming or remaining, or without the self-respect to accept and endorse that conception, one lacks the sort of self-confidence essential to autonomy. None of this occurs solitarily. Our sense of being valuable is itself an interpretive product of our experiences among others in virtue of which we develop our understanding of our own self-worth (Dillon 1997, 245). This connects with a feminist view of autonomy which holds that the autonomous self is a "second person," one who has acquired the essential arts of personhood from someone else. Tightly tied to this idea is the relational view of the self, that the self is in some sense the product of an interconnected web of relationships. It might seem that a vigilante autonomy aims to reject just these sorts of interconnections, for it focuses on the need to take a stand for oneself, to protect and defend one's own commitments if confronted with oppressive forces or specific threats of harm. But rather than wholly rejecting the interpersonal nature of the self, the concept of vigilante autonomy provides an avenue for recognizing that individuals should also be able to place certain limits on those relationships.

While we are inextricably linked to others, it should not mean that we must accept each sort of relationship we have been thrown into. Deeply embedded into self-understandings are messages about persons' worth as coded into social practices, institutions and structures.

Messages which undermine self-worth may be realized as self-imposed limits to one's capacity for agency. Raised in socio-political environments of social oppression, persons may become lesser beings in ways just as they have been defined and expected to be (Dillon 1997, 246). In these sorts of cases, autonomy is restricted if meaningful choices are unreflectively restricted: more obviously because certain restrictions accompany certain kinds of oppressive climates, and less obviously if one's own self-conception and self-confidence constrains one's autonomy in concert with an oppressive environment.

Consequently, we have a need to draw some limits on our interdependence with others. Annette Baier considers interpersonal trust to extend beyond simply trusting others to leave us alone to the view that we entrust strangers with something like "care" of our valued autonomy (1986, 238). But such trust only seems available for the privileged. As we have seen from the above, one cannot always trust others to come to one's rescue if needed if one belongs to a group or groups oppressed by the threat of personal violence. And yet for any person experiencing oppression or multiple systems of oppression, blanketly distrusting all strangers would seem to indicate a *lack* of judgement, an unwillingness to discern when and where trust might be appropriate. This is not to deny that in the case of those we don't know at all, or know only superficially, we might do well to judiciously reserve trust. We can set aside an outline of the parameters of interpersonal trust for another time; but I think that if one wishes to provide exemplars of persons of good trust-judgement, most likely oppressed persons will be the best source. Navigating one's daily life through pockets of resistance, with regular uncertainties about others' good- or will- ill, persons of oppressed groups generally take great care to cultivate steady criteria guiding their decisions in whom to trust and whom not to trust. Since it is appropriate to have degrees of interpersonal trust, valuing one's autonomy must take into account the degree to which we do, or do not, entrust others to value our autonomy.

While self-defence training is, I think, one good method of developing self-trust and self-esteem, a defensive attitude is not. Secure in one's own worthiness, one can respond to one's failures, flaws, and setbacks, while being prepared to act constructively, able to resist others' denigrating responses to oneself (Dillon, 2004). Resistance must be well-placed, not the knee-jerk reaction of the defensive. Persons who are defensive are quick to mistrust or doubt others. Their own perceived shortcomings readily surface to awareness, as do thoughts of others' disappointment or disapproval in themselves. To counteract the subsequent flush of shame, the feeling of unworthiness or the self-talk of self-denigration, the defensive pounce on others' views of themselves as untrustworthy, as dubitable or misguided (Evans 1996). Thus, a defensive attitude is often accompanied by an attack on others' intentions, beliefs, or judgements. Self-defence training, on the other hand, implicitly develops the attitude that which one is defending is *worth* defending. The attitudes of self-trust, self-esteem, and self-confidence cultivated through self-defence training thus are unlikely to coincide with a defensive attitude. At any rate, the aim of self-defence training is not to attack others, but rather to defend oneself only if attacked. As noted earlier, defending oneself may call for many sorts of actions, including avoiding physical confrontations.

The aim of this paper has been to show that self-defence training fosters autonomy through promoting its two essential components, resiliency and resolution. Self-trust and self-esteem developed through self-defence training work together to overcome limits to autonomy in an oppressive society. Training in self-defence encourages members of oppressed groups to claim their rightful physical space and defend it as deemed reasonable. So, for instance, physical training of the body through self-defence might free women from bodily encoded ideals of femininity limiting autonomy through restricting posture, movement, or reactions. For those who have lost a sense of their own worth or value, like the abused woman whom bell hooks encounters, self-defence training may prove itself a good route to developing autonomy where

the aim of cultivating courage may fail. While self-defence training is not the only route to the development of resolve and resistance, its practical value as a source of strength to protect and defend the self against threats of personal violence has much to recommend it.

For the oppressed, realizing one's capacity for autonomy may also require moral imagination of the sort permitting a view of the sorts of social arrangements that would make one's choices and actions more meaningful and more adequate (Babbitt 1997, 129). Perhaps imagining how one could resolve to act, or resist untoward demands of the self, might be enough to develop one's capacity for autonomous action under oppressive social structures. We could include imaginative exercises in self-defence as part of the content of such imagination. Much self-defence training is cognitive and imaginative, requiring persons to envision different situations of varying degrees of threat or harm and to devise effective responses to those situations. Such imaginative readiness to protect oneself creates a confidence in one's ability to protect oneself. This confidence extends not simply to one's physical capacity to defend oneself; it infuses one's spirit to stand for one's commitments before others. Oppressed persons need most of all to nourish and develop the motivation of the self-confident to withstand, avoid, or overcome subordinating forces working against the flourishing of self-esteem and self-trust. Consequently, self-defence imaginative training may prove itself just as a good place to start as self-defence physical training for those persons who are oppressed and who seek to gain or regain control over their lives in a full and meaningful sense.

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