

## **PART III**

# **ETHICS AND INQUIRY**



**VISIONARY PRAGMATISM AND AN ETHICS OF CONNECTIVITY: AN  
ALTERNATIVE TO THE AUTONOMY TRADITION IN ANALYTIC ETHICS**

*Cynthia Willett*

In an era of global interdependence, the concept of autonomy may no longer name our core moral need. Shifting friendships and enmities across political boundaries bear significant consequences for the individual. Perhaps social alliances and hostilities have always had an impact on the flourishing of individuals and communities. But globalization (especially as viewed through the technology of the information age) magnifies the impact of external forces on sovereign bodies. These forces remind individuals of the need to establish the right kind of connections, and diminish (but do not exclude) the relative importance of autonomy for moral and political discourse.

Or, so I will argue. For despite these emerging social practices, moral and political thinkers defend autonomy as the central concept of normative discourse. Defenders of autonomy acknowledge that the standard notion of autonomy fails to account for the social embeddedness of the individual, but they insist that the notion is pivotal for understanding both individuality and freedom. In an important anthology, *Relational Autonomy*, a group of philosophers working in the Anglo-American tradition set out to demonstrate that the old concept can be revamped to suit a new world.<sup>1</sup> And whereas these philosophers take note of postmodern philosophies casting doubt on the old liberal concept, the editors, Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, conclude that “there is no sustained and detailed critique of contemporary accounts of autonomy from any

of these [alternative] perspectives.”<sup>ii</sup>

In this chapter, I would like to take up their challenge. My interest here is not in significant contributions of postmodern social theory, but in the rich vision of the social person in contemporary pragmatism, and especially among authors in the tradition of African American feminism. This vision conceptualizes what it is to be a person first and foremost from our immersions in relationships rather than as an individual apart from these relationships or as a position in a social structure. Vulnerability to the symbolic and material forces of racism and sexual and gender oppression render our immersion in relationships especially salient for these African American authors. However, massive globalization over the past few decades has brought more clearly into view the vulnerability of even the most privileged social groups on a denser network of symbolic and material forces, making the pragmatic vision of these authors more salient for us all. In fact corporations themselves encourage a new way of looking at the social world. Whereas nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century entrepreneurs celebrated the virtues of bootstrap individualism, corporations competing for global markets emphasize skills of communication and relationship-building.<sup>iii</sup> I would not question the liberal tradition of individualism as of significance for contemporary ethics; nor would I think that we should question autonomy as *one* vital dimension of our individuality. Emerging social practices, however, cast doubt on autonomy as *the* pivotal feature of the ethical person. In this respect, these practices urge us to look to the relationships in which individuals thrive as the basis for an ethics; and to understand ethics not first of all in terms of autonomy, but of connectivity, as its core value.

We will turn to an African American tradition of pragmatist thought to develop this core value because analytic revisions of autonomy do not meet head-on the challenges of emerging

social practices to normative theory. In her essay for the collection, Diana Meyers explains what might be retained and left behind by a revamped notion.<sup>iv</sup> A revamped notion, she argues, would not rest on a philosophy of individualism, but would acknowledge instead that individuals understand who they are through multiple, and even conflicting, group memberships. Her contention is that this fact does not undermine the role of autonomy as the core feature of the person. On the contrary, she argues, the individual best negotiates group memberships by developing skills of self-discovery and self-definition. Whereas classic liberals understood autonomy as a virtue commanding respect from others, Meyers redefines autonomy as a set of skills having to do with the self. Following the liberal tradition, Meyers explains autonomy as an important trait in the face of social pressure to conform to norms or yield to traditional authority, and she categorizes these sources of social pressure as forms of “external coercion.” Also in accord with the tradition, Meyers distinguishes those who resist social pressure as autonomous, and those who succumb as “heteronomous.”

Autonomy clearly has merit as an important virtue. It is not as clear, however, that autonomy should name the master virtue in ethics or politics in an age of interdependence. My suspicion is that even the carefully revised “relational” concepts of autonomy continue to carry associations of individualism that obscure the full significance of human and other relationships for who we are. In what follows, I will argue that individuals flourish only through their relationships, and that these relationships should not be defined as “external” to individual identity. Individuals suffer alienation from the self along with alienation from others unless skills of self-discovery join with a social ethics focused on material and symbolic relationships. Furthermore, I argue that the African American feminist tradition of pragmatism offers the most promising place to start thinking about interdependence. Ironically, Meyers’s redefinition of

autonomy may meet the challenge of this age of interdependence at the wrong end. Rather than emphasizing the social component of autonomy as a virtue commanding respect from others, Meyers defines autonomy more narrowly, in terms of a set of individual competency skills. This redefinition of autonomy unwittingly reflects techno-capitalism's interest in productive skills at the expense of qualities vital for enduring social relationships.

When the social roots of the person do not receive their due, the liberal norm of autonomy collapses into just one more all-too-conventional norm yet to be questioned. In this chapter, I will focus on social forces that do not accommodate neatly the autonomy–heteronomy dichotomy of liberal theory. Authors that include the literary writers Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison, social theorist Patricia Hill Collins, and philosopher Cornel West describe a social space that links individuals in bonds of enmity or social friendship. They portray the violation of these social bonds as one of the primary harms of racism and sexism. Based on their accounts of social harm, I argue that moral philosophers need to move beyond the narrow liberal focus on autonomy to a larger social vision.<sup>v</sup> This larger vision shifts the central axis of moral and legal theory from the autonomy–heteronomy dichotomy to the necessity of social bonds, and the dangers of their violation. Borrowing from ancient sources of democratic theory, Lorde and Morrison name these social bonds and their violation “eros” and “hubris,” respectively. Collins cites Lorde and Morrison among others as providing core concepts for what Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Bousia identify in their signal anthology as the “visionary pragmatism of African American women.”<sup>vi</sup>

#### <A> Reconceptualizing Autonomy as Relational in the Analytic Tradition

Despite the importance of autonomy for liberal theory, there is no consensus on the meaning of this term. Libertarians focus on freedom from “undue interference in the exercise of

choice” whereas Rawlsian liberals take as the defining feature of the person “the capacity for rational self-legislation.”<sup>vii</sup> In order to avoid the excessive individualism of the libertarians as well as the neo-Kantian rationalism of Rawls, Mackenzie and Stoljar offer a more nuanced definition. As they explain, “autonomy, or self-determination, involves, at the very least, the capacity for reflection on one’s motivational structure and the capacity to change it in response to reflection. This view is underpinned by the intuition that there is an important difference between those aspects of an agent’s motivational structure that she unreflectively finds herself with and those aspects that, as a result of autonomous reflection, she regards as ‘her own.’”<sup>viii</sup>

Contemporary Anglo-American theorists differ over whether they favor procedural or substantive notions of autonomy. As Mackenzie and Stoljar explain, substantive notions appeal to normative claims in order to evaluate what types of individual preferences (desires, beliefs, values, etc.) are considered to be autonomous. Procedural accounts rely on procedures alone (for example, reflection on one’s own priorities, the integration of one’s motivational core, or, as in the case of Meyers, self-discovery and self-definition skills) in order to guarantee autonomy. Procedural views do not provide any substantial clues as to how to evaluate the ultimate norms and preferences that the individual may choose. Because a more pragmatic view would question whether rules of procedure (of any social game with anything at stake) could ever be perceived to be politically neutral or value-and-context free, I will turn directly to the substantive view of autonomy.

My contention is that the notion of autonomy, even as revised by the relational autonomy theorists, is inherently too rationalistic and individualistic to explain impact of social forces, including race and color. Before turning to an analysis of these social forces, a brief look at what some feminist autonomy theorists evaluate as an oppressive norm gives us a sense of the

problem. Mackenzie and Stoljar (citing the contributions of Paul Benson to autonomy theory) offer feminine appearance as a typical example of such a norm. Appealing to “feminist intuitions,” some strong substantive theorists argue that “the stereotype suggesting that personal appearance is a component of self-worth presupposes a false norm.”<sup>x</sup> They note that some individuals might reflect on this norm in such a way as to adhere to the demands of procedural autonomy, and yet choose to adopt the norm as their own. Only a substantial theory of autonomy can accommodate the feminist intuition regarding the irrelevance of appearance to self-worth.<sup>x</sup>

Social critiques of norms of appearance constitute important contributions to larger social and cultural theories of social freedom. Individuals who cultivate a submissive style or demeanor *may* inadvertently support a system of subordination that they would otherwise oppose. (Of course, sometimes these strategies of style are part of subversive practices of empowerment.) Still, I wonder if the dismissal of concerns with appearance “as a false norm” doesn’t reveal a hidden rationalism in the feminist intuitions of some of these theorists. As embodied social creatures attuned to one another by visual cues, and part of a culture dominated by visual media, I do not know how it is possible to encounter one another apart from the social impact of appearance. Cultural critiques of appearance are important not because they enable us to see past the embodied person to the rational thinker but because they interpret and challenge visual symbols of power and status. We may believe that appearance is way overrated, or that specific codes of appearance are distorted or wrong, and yet acknowledge the irretrievable impact of the body on social and personal identity. If reflective women “buy into” norms of feminine appearance, we cannot condemn these women as unenlightened or heteronomous. We need to deal with (not deny the reality of) ever-present social norms, including norms that regulate the appearance. The social space in which we are immersed is more real than autonomy theory



seems to allow.

Among other visible qualities affecting choices is skin color. Skin color has carried social meaning at least since classical Western culture, where references to color abound. Social meanings may shift and social tensions may ease, but social capital related to such “rationally irrelevant” aspects of character as skin color do not show signs of disappearing from our view. Whereas we may cultivate critical reflection on the distorted meanings of skin color, we must acknowledge that the reflective individual cannot exit anytime soon from a social world where color matters. There is no kingdom of noumenal souls without flesh in our experience. In this world, and for the foreseeable future, it is not possible to ignore the effects of color in the social realm. Harmful social forces cannot be countered by the hyper-reflective person who claims she does not see them. Dealing with the effects of the color hierarchy requires negotiation with a social element that is so ingrained in culture, history, and memory as to form “a second skin.” The political and ethical principle of equality requires more than cultivating the individual skill of autonomy cherished by liberalism. It requires cultivating a social infrastructure based on fair relations—social friendships, intimate relationships, and economic cooperation—through highly visible lines of color.

The defenders of autonomy claim that their theories can accommodate the impact of the social infrastructure on the individual. They observe that we are “second persons,” maturing as individuals only through relations of dependency on caring and nurturing others.<sup>xi</sup> This is a significant point but it does not capture the full meaning of social connectedness for the individual. The individual aims for more from others than the care and nurturance that would allow her to develop her own sense of self. Our relations with others focus on a wealth of pleasures and a range of stakes, including claims to status, contests for honor, and the need for

acknowledgment as well as a sense of belonging. These sources of identity do not hinge on the single, and as I have argued elsewhere, reductive and sentimental, dimension of nurturing or care.<sup>xii</sup> Later I will return to this richer sense of sociality through black feminist-pragmatist conceptions of eros and friendship.

Defenders of relational autonomy may go so far as to acknowledge that “persons, and hence their characteristics and capacities, are constituted, and not simply caused by the relations to others in which they stand.”<sup>xiii</sup> This claim sounds like a more promising way to account for our social embeddedness. The editors interpret the claim as having two meanings. First is the psychological meaning. The editors argue that social relations may produce elements of the psychological makeup of a person without compromising autonomy. We might think of ways in which social virtues such as courage or humor vary with culture. One can invent an original form of humor in response to one’s culture, but one cannot practice a form of humor that is irrelevant without just being less than funny. But then, one wonders, would not all socially constituted selves be in some vital ways externally produced and, therefore, as Meyers clarifies the notion, “heteronomous”? The response to this question might stem from the particular aspects of the person that autonomy theorists recognize as constituted by our social relations. For the most part, they restrict these aspects of the self that are inevitably socially constituted to self-trust and, especially, self-esteem.<sup>xiv</sup> They also seem pretty much to assume that once the mature individual acquires self-esteem, she can make choices and otherwise act apart from the influence of social norms.

But this restriction of sociality to its affect on self-esteem or self-trust strikes me as too narrow. Cultural differences, and especially, our strong need to defend our traditions and challenge others (here I include my own defense of a distinct tradition of pragmatism and my

challenge to the analytic tradition), suggest that we are embedded in a social infrastructure in a much deeper sense than autonomy theory allows. Our social differences reflect how essential preferences (or motivational structures) are constituted through the impact of others, and without these socially rooted preferences, we would experience emptiness at the core of the self.

Preferences with regard to who and how we love, our occupations, the music we enjoy, or other so-called private matters are not immune from social measures of meaning. When these social forces are debilitating, we need to change the source of influence, but we cannot ignore these forces without losing our contact with reality. We do not thrive when we experience our distinct values alone and without acknowledgment from others. We may struggle to change our traditions, cultures, or social milieu to reflect our contemporary values, but we are either frustrated or happy with the social milieu because we draw intrinsic meaning from these so-called external sources of who we are. Heteronomy nourishes the individual and expands the soul. Autonomy theorists threaten to flatten the dynamic of the social world (with its hostilities and alliances) into secondary characteristics (such as self-esteem) of the individual. For this reason, I wonder if instead of reconstructing autonomy as relational, we might enlarge our ethical vision by readjusting our focus to social bonds and their proper limits.

This alternative focus may be difficult to envision because of the conceptual limitations of Anglo-American political theory. The framework for contemporary theory was in part set out by Isaiah Berlin's influential essay "Two Concepts of Liberty."<sup>xv</sup> In that essay, Berlin distinguishes two meanings for freedom. Classic liberal theory, he argues, focuses on what he calls "negative freedom" and defines as freedom from external constraints or control. A second approach to freedom focuses on the ways in which one can be as controlled by one's own wayward desires as much as by external forces. Philosophers in this tradition of "positive

freedom” divide the ideal self from the real self, and redefine freedom in terms of rational autonomy.

Whereas most discussions of freedom and autonomy take place within this framework, Berlin sketches a third, and less-well-known, concept of freedom. He encounters this third concept among oppressed classes or nationalities resisting colonialism, imperialism, or racism. These groups do not call for a freedom from external control, or at least this is not their only demand. These groups articulate a need to feel that they are full and equal “members of the society to which, historically, morally, economically, and perhaps ethnically,” they feel that they “belong.” This third concept of freedom rests on the assumption that the “individual self is not something which I can detach from my relationship with others, or from those attributes of myself which consist in their attitude towards me.”<sup>xvi</sup> Berlin goes on to explain that these oppressed people suffer from paternalism (as liberals would assume), but that they do not understand paternalism in the same way as do liberals. These oppressed people do not focus their concerns on an “external” tyranny that aims to control their lives, but on oppressive norms that constitute an “insult” to their self-conception. Berlin explains that as an oppressed person, “I may, in bitter longing for status, prefer to be bullied ... by some member of my own race or social class... to being well and tolerantly treated by someone from some higher and remoter group, who does not recognize me for what I wish to feel myself to be.”<sup>xvii</sup> I will return to this third concept, or “social freedom,” as both a freedom from “insult” and a need to “belong” later in my chapter.

The editors of *Relational Autonomy* acknowledge a second and, I think, more radical, meaning to the claim that persons are constituted through social relations. Whereas the psychological claim focuses only on the ways in which others may influence our sense of self (or

at least, our self-esteem), a second, metaphysical charge asks whether social relationships constitute the identity of the person. The editors raise this possibility only to dismiss its relevance to the debate on autonomy. Their claim is that “the metaphysical question of the essential nature of persons is separate from and perhaps prior to the question of the nature of a person’s characteristics and capacities, including her autonomy.”<sup>xviii</sup> I do not think, however, that the metaphysical question of the definition of a person is separate from the moral question of autonomy. On the contrary, an ontology that would center individual identity on social relationships, or friendship broadly speaking, threatens to displace the autonomy–heteronomy dualism altogether from the major axis of moral and political debate.

#### <A> Hate Crimes: A Test Case for Autonomy Theory

Now I want to turn to a specific example of a social crime that is of concern to many liberal theorists, and yet cannot be explained without stretching autonomy theory way too thin. Anglo-American philosophy, and in particular, those contemporary philosophies remain uninfluenced by Hegel’s critical appropriation of Kant, have had difficulty finding the discursive resources to articulate the harm of hate speech. Hegel argues that self-consciousness does not arise through reflection alone but through the struggle for social recognition. This struggle cannot be flattened out to a quest for individual autonomy without losing the social dynamic (include the sense of status and belonging) that for Hegel defines the individual.

Susan Brison’s work exemplifies one of the most creative efforts among autonomy theorists to account for the social dynamic that defines who we are.<sup>xix</sup> Fully aware of the challenge for autonomy theorists, she begins her discussion of hate speech by noting that those who argue against the regulation of hate speech typically appeal to the “autonomy defense of free speech.”<sup>xx</sup> Brison, however, believes that she can reinterpret the principle of autonomy in such a way as to

defend legal restraints on hate speech. According to Brison, defenders of unregulated speech fail to acknowledge the multiple meanings of autonomy, and the ways in which this concept can be interpreted in order to account for the harm of hate speech. Brison puts forth a strong case for the regulation of hate speech on the basis of its harm to individual autonomy. The question is whether she is able to explain fully this harm through autonomy theory or whether, as I will argue, this kind of harm points to a dimension of the person that overrides the standard dichotomies of Anglo-American theory.

Brison proposes a definition of autonomy that she believes might account for the harm of hate speech. This harm can be articulated, she argues, if we define autonomy in terms of having the capability to function. She understands “capability” in terms borrowed from Amartya Sen. She explains: “In Sen’s account, ‘Living may be seen as consisting of a set of interrelated functionings,’ consisting of beings and doings.’ The well-being of a person is dependent on functionings that range from ‘such elementary things as being adequately nourished, being in good health, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, etc., to more complex achievements such as being happy, having self-respect, taking part in the life of the community, and so on.’”<sup>xxi</sup>

Brison acknowledges the difficulty in determining the essential human capabilities, but she believes that we can agree on several points. She brings together these points in order to offer an enhanced conception of relational autonomy. First, she observes that individuals should be free from emotions such as extreme fear and anger and psychological states such as depression in order to function autonomously. If hate speech induces these emotions, she argues, hate speech is wrong. Brison’s observation stops short of examining the social function of emotions such as anger, or what I will approach through a more specific moral anger—outrage, and even

depression. I will return to the social function of emotions later in my discussion of friendship and ancient drama.

Second, Brison discerns several ways in which autonomy depends upon social relations. She explains that autonomy is “constitutively relational, in that it requires the right sorts of ongoing relations with others for it to be sustained.”<sup>xxii</sup> As I understand her claim, social relationships serve as means to the higher end of autonomy. Brison avoids entirely the converse claim, namely, that autonomy might serve as a significant means to achieving our higher needs for the right kind of social relationships. “Our personal, familial, social, political, and economic relations with others are what enable or inhibit our access to a range of significant options,” she continues, pointing out that this notion of “significant” is “explicitly normative.”<sup>xxiii</sup> The claim is that social relationships serve as means to enlarge individual options; I wonder, if instead we should valorize individual options inasmuch as they serve to enable the right kind of social relationships.

Third, Brison argues that a viable relational theory of autonomy should be able to articulate the dangers lurking in what is known as the “sour grapes phenomenon.” If oppressed groups internalize social values that reinforce their lowly status, then procedural and weak substantive views of autonomy cannot guarantee autonomous decisions. I would argue that substantive views of moral danger need to go beyond consideration of the reflective judgment of the critic to a discussion of how the critic judges those with lower social standing without adding insult to injury.

With these three points, Brison claims that she is able to address in full the harm of hate speech. Let us see if she in fact can. Brison elaborates on three specific ways in which hate speech can cause injury. Whereas she argues that each of these sorts of injuries constitute

assaults on the target's autonomy, I will argue that these injuries constitute more directly assaults on social relations that allow individuals to flourish.

First, she argues that hate speech can cause injury in the form of "an uncontrollable emotional response akin to a slap in the face." "It can also short-circuit reason" by provoking such emotions as fear, rage, or humiliation.<sup>xxiv</sup> Brison is right to argue that these emotions can disorient reason and interfere with autonomy. In the context of an injury "akin to a slap in the face," however, these emotions are not primarily disorienting. These emotions are also information-carrying responses that orient the target to an outrage on her social status. Brison adds that hate speech can lead to fear over one's physical well-being and that hate speech can jeopardize one's ability to think clearly. But even when hate speech does not lead to fear or disorientation, it constitutes an assault on its target. This is because hate speech is not primarily directed toward disrupting the target's autonomy. Hate speech constitutes a social assault whose harm is in the symbolic field of interpersonal relationships. The individual who is assaulted loses symbolic capital in this social field. Racial assault may or may not diminish an individual's personal sense of self-esteem or reflective powers. The assault, however, does impact the social field, rendering him a less desirable colleague or business partner. The appropriate moral response to this crime of arrogance is not controlled reflection, but moral outrage.

Similarly, if melancholy results from assault then the resolution might not be to imprison the assailant and prescribe antidepressant medication to the victim. We should not focus our accounts of traumatic assaults solely on the harm done to the target. We need to reckon with the damaged relationships among us. My example of the latter kind of reckoning comes from a literary tradition that, as we shall see, resonates strongly with African American pragmatism, namely, Greek drama. In Greek drama communal relationships, not autonomous individuals,



take center stage. In contrast with a personal narrative of trauma, ancient plays like *Antigone* bring at least two actors to the center of the plot. The focus is not on the victim of violence (Antigone), but on the self-destruction of the agent as well (Creon). Similarly, Euripides's *Medea* does not narrate the reflective thought of the solitary protagonist, but unfolds in the dynamic between Medea and Jason, and ripples outward to entire families and communities.

Second, Brison argues that hate speech can create a hostile environment. A hostile environment can diminish the victim's self-esteem and thereby lower their aims and ambitions. This is the "sour grapes" phenomenon. Brison argues in favor of state intervention in cases where the norms are so debilitating as to interfere with the ability of individuals to form or act on their choices. Crucial to her argument is the insight that "[t]he processes by which . . . expectations are lowered are largely ones that involve speech, that is, the social and cultural dissemination . . . of racial and gender norms."<sup>xxv</sup> Again Brison is right to point out that unregulated hate speech can harm the autonomy of its victim. But whereas a hostile environment can have an impact on self-esteem and the range of viable options, a hostile environment constitutes more directly an assault on the social status of the target. Hateful speech undermines possibilities for fair economic cooperation and harms social and intimate friendships. As a consequence of these damaged relationships, the target may (but also may not) experience a lack of options or ambition.

Finally, Brison argues that hate speech can be viewed as a form of defamation, or group libel. She notes that "the classic text on torts" defines "defamation . . . as communication that 'tends to harm the reputation of another as to lower him in the estimation of the community or to deter third persons from associating or dealing with him.'" . . . [C]ommunications are often defamatory because they tend to expose another to hatred, ridicule or contempt."<sup>xxvi</sup> Whereas the

classic definition of defamation focuses on injury to social standing, Brison translates the relevant injury to the restriction of “a person’s available options.”<sup>xxvii</sup> The original textbook definition comes closer, I think, to describing the full nature of the harm. Although the individual who is a target of ridicule may lose economic or other options, she also loses something more valuable, namely, his sense of social identity.

This is because being a person is not about autonomy plus options. Being a person is about flourishing in a social milieu. The injury of hate speech exemplifies the impact of symbolic crimes on the individual. Whereas this type of crime may interfere with the liberal subject’s capacities for self-definition and reflective thought, the primary aim of the assault is on his social being. The individual needs friendships of various kinds in order to meet economic but also socio-psychic needs. Without these friendships, the individual suffers from melancholy as well as other symptoms of decline. The attempt to translate the assault on the social person to assaults on autonomy threatens to narrow the meaning of these relationships to a simple need for security—a freedom from fear and a positive need for self-esteem. A relational notion of autonomy relegates the bonds of social life to the backdrop for a single-minded focus on the needs of the reflective individual. If I am correct, then even an enhanced theory of autonomy fails to overcome the social minimalism of modern liberal theory.

#### <A>The Third Freedom and an Ethical Vision of Connectivity

In *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, Patricia Hill Collins defines as a “visionary pragmatism” a theory of justice that fosters an “intense connectedness.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Joining with other black leaders, she calls this sense of connectedness, when combined with a passion for justice, an ethic of love. The aim of such a theory is to acknowledge the intersectional dynamics of social power (class, race, and sex, among other social distinctions) on

individual identity, while not yielding to the moral relativism of identity politics. A visionary pragmatism based on a love ethic aims for a universal humanism, not the “individualized, sexualized private, romantic love currently commodified and marketed by the American media.”<sup>xxxix</sup> The call for an ethic of love by a major social theorist takes up bell hooks’s challenge to political progressives in her 1994 essay “Love as the Practice of Freedom.”<sup>xxx</sup> In this essay, bell hooks warns theorists bent on material analyses of oppression not to overlook the communal and spiritual needs of oppressed people. Political progressions lack a “powerful discourse of love,” hooks argues, and she points to Cornel West as a major source for the reemergence of this ethics in political discourse.

West’s central contention in *Race Matters* is that modern societies have been driven by capitalism and white supremacy to the brink of nihilism.<sup>xxxi</sup> Like any disease of the soul, he observes, Western pathologies cannot be “overcome arguments or analyses”; this pathology would have to be “tamed by love and care,” or what he calls a “love ethic.” Such an ethic “has nothing to do with sentimental feelings or tribal connections. Rather it is a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among a downtrodden people. The best exemplar of this love ethics is depicted . . . in Toni Morrison’s great novel *Beloved*.” West is not the first to cite Morrison’s novel *Beloved* as a compelling source for a vision of justice theory that is based on connection.<sup>xxxii</sup> In an earlier book, *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins draws upon a well-known essay by Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic” (written in 1978),<sup>xxxiii</sup> to bring the novel to the center of social theory. Collins explains that Lorde theorized that oppressive racial systems “function by controlling the ‘permission for desire’—in other words, by harnessing the energy of fully human relationships to exigencies of domination.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Collins finds this same understanding of oppression, and a corresponding vision of freedom, in the novel *Beloved*. In a

central scene, Sethe and Paul D ponder the experience of being free from slavery. Sethe explains to Paul D, “It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted to. You know what I mean.” Paul D recalls his experiences on a chain gang in Georgia. “He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well, now, *that* was freedom.” As Collins explains, “freedom from slavery meant not only the absence of capricious masters and endless work but . . . the power to ‘love anything you chose.’”<sup>xxxv</sup>

Morrison’s novel unfolds a notion of freedom that incorporates but also expands beyond the parameters of individual choice and personal reflection that define the moral person in liberal theory. The characters aspire to intimate relationships or friendships as matters at least in part of “choice,” and therefore not as tyrannically imposed duty or externally coerced bind. The narrative does not deny the importance of classic liberal freedom from external coercion (“masters” of all kinds) and freedom from oppressive labor. The characters in the novel grow as they recover the capacity for autonomous self-reflection and the capacity to trust themselves. The plot turns, however, not on the classic liberal goal of choice, but on the capacity to love and otherwise form relationships. How can we conceptualize the differences between liberal and pragmatist notions of freedom?

Collins offers some clues through her discussion of Lorde. Lorde locates at the core of the person not the abstract cognitive capacity for rational reflection per se, but an “erotic”

capacity for creative work and meaningful social bonds. In contrast with the conventional, modern view of the erotic as overly sexualized, and even pornographic, Lorde returns to an ancient conception. As she explains, “the very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros* personifying creative power and harmony.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> Autonomy theory might focus on the damage that oppression does to the individual’s capacity to reflect and make choices for himself. No doubt oppression can and does inflict this kind of harm, and for this among other reasons it is wrong. But oppression can also sharpen critical insight into fundamental choices. Lorde focuses on the damage that oppression can do to the erotic core of the emotive self. Oppression renders the individual unable to feel properly, and it is this emotive (and not an exclusively cognitive) incapacity that threatens to render the oppressed docile. As Lorde explains, oppression solicits “the fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves [and it is this fear that] keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Both liberal and pragmatist notions aim to free the individual from external and distorted interior powers, but they conceptualize the impact of these powers differently. The liberal theorist aims for the individual to think critically and make autonomous choices. What autonomy theorists describe in terms of debilitating norms that lower the aims and/or harm the self-esteem of the victim (the “sour grapes” phenomenon) Lorde describes as fear of desire and deprived sense of creative energy. The emancipation of the person requires the cultivated expression of these erotic desires in meaningful work and social relations, for example, “writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Raising self-esteem may bolster rational reflection but it does not nearly suffice to foster creative desires and substantive social relations. Freedom, at least as Lorde understands it, is more about being able to feel fully than to think clearly.

A second important contrast concerns the basic direction of the psyche. The liberal view cherishes the capacity of turning inward, to reflect upon one's motives and beliefs. Lorde does not exclude reflection, but she emphasizes different capacities at the core of the person. Images of growth, moving beyond inner distortions, and turning the self outwards towards an outside source of energy (the sunlight, the body of a woman one loves) suggest that the major work of becoming a self centers on an expanded awareness of the external sources of our happiness that the reflective individual might neglect or even deny. The individual grows as a person from a creative engagement that begins with, but also culminates in, relationships with others. The idea of expanding the self by turning outwards appears repeatedly in visionary pragmatist writings. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison describes love through the image of a turtle able to stretch its head outside of the "bowl" or shell, described also as a "shield."<sup>xxxix</sup> As Lorde emphasizes, the Greek term *eros* names not a turn inward, but a centrifugal pull of the self outwards. The effect is not calm reflection, but life-bestowing connection: As Lorde writes, "I find the erotic . . . a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience."<sup>xl</sup> The individual grows with, and not in critical distance from, its social bonds.

Brison contends that an adequate theory of relational autonomy accounts for the social embeddedness of the individual missed in an excessively rationalistic theory. She aims to avoid the excessive individualism (or the "separation thesis") by acknowledging that individuals are essentially in some way connected with and/or constituted by others. As I understand the analysis of sociality, Brison joins other autonomy theorists who seek to establish legal and social support for securing the conditions for individual self-esteem. Only then might an individual take possession of herself. A relational theory of autonomy acknowledges that social relations play a

role in individual well-being, but consigns them to the background, as props for the development and maintenance of the reflective self. The primary focus of the autonomous subject is best told by a first-person narrative of self-ownership.

A pragmatist vision unfolds a drama of the individual in relation with others. Relationships move to the foreground of the plot. As Lorde's essay suggests, sociality yields virtues, pleasures, and interests more diverse than self-esteem or self-trust. The poetic use of eros, and not autonomy, to name the defining feature of the person distances us from conventional liberal conceptions of the self. The Greek term recalls the central role of friendships in the social function of emotion in ancient democratic cultures. By broadening our perspective beyond the narrow contours of modern life, Lorde's essay questions the liberal assumption that reflection upon what is mine, and expulsion of what is not mine, is the central project of the self. For Lorde, the person who is firmly rooted within his or her own desires is able to turn outward and expand the boundaries of the self.

Lorde's poetic discourse on erotic drive takes us some way towards understanding the parameters of visionary pragmatism. The ethic of eros, however, may strike the autonomy theorist as sentimental and inadequately critical of social conventions, and in part for good reason. Morrison herself cautions against overreading the value of love in her novel. Lorde's essay, written in the cultural climate of the 1970s, articulates libidinal sources of creativity and selfhood, but does not lay out in full the vision of Morrison's novel.

In the essay "Home," Morrison explains that the "driving force of the narrative is not love . . . [but] something that precedes love, follows love, informs love, shapes it, and to which love is subservient."<sup>xli</sup> The contrast between love and that which precedes love indicates what is missing from interpretations of the novel that are overly influenced by Lorde. Collins glosses *freedom* as

“the power to ‘love anything you chose,’” but Morrison had not written the word “power.”

Morrison’s text reads: “a place where you could love anything you *chose*.... *that* was freedom.”

Instead of power, she had written of freedom as though it were a place.

What is the significance of this difference? Morrison believes that common misreadings of her novel stem from a late editorial change in her manuscript that she now views as a mistake. The editorial change occurs in the last lines of the novel. These lines are part of the coda, with its reminiscences on the ghost (named Beloved) that has haunted the lives of Sethe and Paul D after slavery. Once the ghost is vanquished from Sethe’s house, the telltale signs of the ghostly presence, the “breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for” becomes “wind in eaves” or, finally, “Just weather.” In the essay, Morrison draws our attention to the mistake in the final two lines of the novel: “Certainly no clamor for a kiss. Beloved.” Following her editor’s advice, she had replaced the second to the last word of the original manuscript with the word *kiss*. She believes this was a mistake because, as she explains, “the word ‘kiss’ works at a level a bit too shallow. It searches for and locates a quality or element of the novel that was not, and is not its primary feature. The driving force of the narrative is not love,” she writes, and she glosses love as “the fulfillment of physical desire.” To be sure, Morrison is echoing concerns of Collins among others: the love that the novel explores is not the sentimental, romantic image that we sometimes oppose to enlightened self-interest. The driving force of the novel is not love, but precedes love, as a “necessity”: “the necessity was for connection, acknowledgment, a paying-out of homage still due.” The repetition of the word *necessity* indicates a fundamental desire that is itself not a choice because it is not an option. Acknowledgment is a basic human need. Spiritually, we understand the connections that we enjoy in terms having less to do with the sublimation of libidinal desire, as Lorde’s essay would suggest, than with a sense of debt, or as



Morrison writes, homage due. The term *home* names better than does the term *love* that sense of connection that compels us to find meaning outside of ourselves. Place as a sense of origin and belonging names what *Beloved's* ghost, what all people in diaspora, must seek. In order to avoid the excessive physical and sexual connotations of *eros*, we might name the force that *Beloved* describes as “social *eros*.” The Greek term fits with Morrison’s return to ancient Greek and African cultures to articulate the distinctly African American sensibility that she explores in her novels. The term avoids as well the romantic and Christian associations of the term *love* with selfless devotion or humility. She explains the need to replace or deepen Christian sources in her essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken.”<sup>xlii</sup> There she explains that “[a] large part of the satisfaction I have always received from reading Greek tragedy, for example, is in its similarity to Afro-American communal structures (the function of song and chorus, the heroic struggle between the claims of community and individual hubris) and African religion and philosophy.”<sup>xliii</sup>

But if social *eros* were to replace autonomy on the central axis of normative theory, then what term best names the harm that oppression does? In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Morrison meditates on “the concept of racial superiority,” and she describes this concept as “a moral outrage within the bounds of man to repair.”<sup>xliiv</sup> “Moral outrage” is a common translation for the Greek term “hubris.” And as she suggests, the claims of the community against individual hubris define the central plot of tragic drama. The function of the chorus (typically representing the voice of the *demos*) is to warn against hubris. Not surprisingly, Morrison lists as characteristic of black art: “The real presence of a chorus. Meaning the community or the reader at large, commenting on the action as it goes ahead.”<sup>xlv</sup>

According to Aristotle, hubris is a type of “insult,” or “a form of slighting, since it consists in doing and saying things that cause shame to the victim . . . simply for the pleasure involved.... The cause of the pleasure thus enjoyed by the insolent man is that he thinks himself greatly superior to others when ill-treating them.”<sup>xlvi</sup> The ancient Greek *demos* enjoyed moral and legal codes against hubris, and they thought of these codes as ways to control the excesses of the elites. These codes included restraints on speech intended to assault the status of their target. The modern liberal philosopher who defines freedom through the needs of the middle class borrows much from classical sources but overlooks the codes that the common people used to control the arrogance of the elites.<sup>xlvii</sup> Morrison returns to ancient sources of democracy through her interest in classical tragedy, and, like other moderns, she eschews the male-centered polis based on honor and status outside the family. Perhaps modern liberals were right to question the limits of a society based on honor alone. In the process, however, they occluded from their vision the social ethos of ancient democracy. Morrison’s pragmatic vision awakens the spirit of a different kind of democracy—what Berlin calls a third type of freedom. The central axis of this vision is not autonomy and heteronomy. The central focus is on friendships in communities and among diverse peoples, and on the hubris that tears these bonds apart.

#### <A>NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoijar, eds., *Relational Autonomy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>iii</sup> Jeanne C. Meister, *Corporate Universities: Lessons in Building a World-Class Work Force* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 2.

<sup>iv</sup> Mackenzie and Stoijar, *Relational Autonomy*, 15, 1–2.

<sup>v</sup> The argument in this chapter extends the discussion in my “Rethinking Autonomy in an Age of Interdependence,” *APA Newsletter* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 121–23; and in *Irony in the Age of Empire* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 36–40.

<sup>vi</sup> Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Bousia, *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>vii</sup> Mackenzie and Stoijar, *Relational Autonomy*, 5.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>xii</sup> See my *The Soul of Justice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 31–44.

<sup>xiii</sup> Mackenzie and Stoijar, *Relational Autonomy*, 7.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>xv</sup> “Two Concepts of Liberty” in Isaiah Berlin’s *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118–72.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

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<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>xviii</sup> Mackenzie and Stoijar, *Relational Autonomy*, 8.

<sup>xix</sup> For the full argument, see Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>xx</sup> Mackenzie and Stoijar, *Relational Autonomy*, 280.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>xxii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid., 283–84.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>xxv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 188.

<sup>xxix</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>xxx</sup> bell hooks, “Love as the Practice of Freedom,” in *Outlaw Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 243–42.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 29.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 53–59. The key themes of Lorde’s work include interdependence, ethical vision, and eros; for contextualizing her work in black feminist thought, see Rudolph P. Byrd’s “Introduction. Create Your Own Fire: Audre Lorde and the Tradition of Black Radical Thought,” in *I Am Your Sister: Collected and*

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*Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd, Johnnetta Betsch Cole, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 336.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 182.

<sup>xxxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 55.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxxix</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 105.

<sup>xl</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 57.

<sup>xli</sup> Toni Morrison, "Home," in *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Random House, 1998), 7.

<sup>xlii</sup> Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 24–56.

<sup>xliii</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>xliv</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>xlv</sup> Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers*, ed. Man Evans (New York: Anchor Press, 1984), 341.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985); see especially Irwin's glossary entry for "wanton aggression," which is how he translates hubris (432).

<sup>xlvii</sup> Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 208–12.

