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How Should Feminist Autonomy Theorists Respond to the Problem of Internalized Oppression?

In “Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition,”¹ Natalie Stoljar asks whether a procedural or a substantive approach to autonomy is best for addressing feminist concerns.² On the most general level, a theory is procedural if it does not *a priori* rule out any specific decisions or preferences. In other words, as long as you follow the given procedure to come to a decision, whatever decision you make is considered autonomous. In contrast, substantive theories tend to include additional criteria such as requiring sufficient self-respect or self-worth³ or requiring specific content of beliefs or preferences such as knowing the difference between right and wrong.⁴ Another key difference is that procedural theories rely solely on the subjective perspective or the “internal” decision-making process, whereas strong substantive theories include nonsubjective criteria or certain “external” value judgments.

Ultimately, Stoljar argues that feminists should adopt a substantive approach to autonomy. I will build on Stoljar’s argument. Since Stoljar gives an in-depth analysis of why procedural theories cannot adequately address feminist concerns, I only briefly explain this problem in the first section.⁵ Specifically, I emphasize how procedural theories fail to ade-

¹Natalie Stoljar, “Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition,” in Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (eds.), *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 94-111.

²For examples of feminist discussions about the pros and cons of procedural versus substantive theories of autonomy, see Paul Benson, “Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization,” *Social Theory and Practice* 17 (1991): 385-408; “Free Agency and Self-Worth,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1994): 650-68; “Freedom and Value,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 465-86; Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Mackenzie and Stoljar (eds.), *Relational Autonomy*; Diana T. Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women’s Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³Benson, “Free Agency and Self-Worth”; Robin S. Dillon, “Toward a Feminist Conception of Self-Respect,” *Hypatia* 7 (1992): 52-69.

⁴Susan Wolf, “Asymmetrical Freedom,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980): 151-66.

⁵In her analysis, Stoljar considers five different ways that procedural theorists interpret the critical reflection necessary for autonomy. She argues that none of these versions can adequately account for the feminist intuition that decisions influenced by oppressive

quately address what is pernicious about some forms of socialization or the problem of internalized oppression.⁶ Stoljar further argues that feminist autonomy theorists should adopt a strong substantive theory. In the second section, I build on this argument by starting to articulate my own theory.⁷ I use two similar cases to explain my theory and show how a strong substantive theory can more accurately address the problem of internalized oppression. In the final section, I briefly address some of the concerns raised by procedural theorists who are leery of a substantive approach. Specifically, procedural theorists worry that substantive autonomy unduly narrows the scope of autonomy and overemphasizes women's victimhood while ignoring their agency. In contrast, I argue that procedural theorists are too generous in their definition of autonomy.

The Problem

Procedural autonomy theorists believe that autonomy has to do with how people make decisions rather than the specific content of the decisions.⁸ For this reason, procedural theories are considered "content neutral." In general, an agent uses critical (or self-) reflection to learn about herself (increase self-knowledge). Critical reflection means that a person must reflect (or at least be willing to reflect) on her personal preferences (including desires, beliefs, values, and goals). Through this process of reflection, she will identify with some preferences and reject others. This is

norms of femininity should not count as autonomous.

⁶My understanding of oppression is that it is a harm inflicted on an individual based on her group membership. Internalized oppression is internalized norms that lead a person to participate in perpetuating her own oppression. For more detailed definitions of oppression, see Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Ann E. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, Cal.: The Crossing Press, 1983).

⁷Stoljar considers two versions of Paul Benson's normative competence criteria and argues that the stronger version is necessary to account for the feminist intuition (for more on the theories she uses, see Benson, "Free Agency and Self-Worth," and "Freedom and Value"). I argue that this version (discussed later in the paper) is insufficient and needs more definition about what specific beliefs or reasons are problematic. Benson's weaker version discusses self-worth, or self-respect; I also discuss this criterion, but do not interpret it exactly in the same way Benson uses it.

⁸A sample of procedural autonomy theorists includes: John Christman, "Autonomy and Personal History," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21 (1991): 1-24; Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*; Diana T. Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

how she makes preferences “her own” or creates an authentic self. Autonomous decisions or actions will be those that are in keeping with her self-chosen preferences or her authentic self. Developing preferences that are “our own” and living in harmony with them is what it means to be autonomous. In this way, procedural theorists claim that autonomy has to do with *how* a decision is made, not *what* decision is made. With this overview, we can see that procedural autonomy theorists emphasize critical reflection, authenticity, and content neutrality. I consider these to be the key components of a procedural approach to autonomy theory.

Procedural theorists often make distinctions between preferences, beliefs, values, goals, and principles. While I recognize that these are not the same thing, what they have in common is that procedural theorists believe they must be open to self-reflection to count as autonomous. In other words, regardless of whether they are discussing preferences, beliefs, values, goals, or principles, procedural theorists assess autonomy from the “internal” or subjective perspective. For this reason, I do not believe a fine-tuned distinction is necessary here. Instead, I will use “preferences” as a shorthand for these various self-reflections and endorsements.

As we turn our attention to substantive autonomy, things become more complicated. Instead of relying on the general procedure for autonomous decision-making, substantive theorists use a wider variety of approaches. For this reason, it is more difficult to summarize the key components of substantive theories. We can start by separating substantive approaches into weak substantive theories and strong substantive theories.⁹ In general, I argue that weak substantive theories are “supplemental”—they add requirements to the procedure for autonomous decision-making. For example, Trudy Govier adopts Diana Meyers’s procedural approach to autonomy, but argues that women must also have self-trust for the procedure to be efficacious.¹⁰ Like procedural theorists, weak substantive theorists rely mainly on an internal process of critical or self-reflection, but argue that the procedure will “work” (yield an autonomous decision) only if the person has the proper “self-trust” (or other self-reflexive attitudes). In contrast, strong substantive theories go “beyond” the subjective perspective that procedural theorists insist on. Instead of relying on an internal (subjective) procedure for autonomous decision-making, strong substantive theorists argue that autonomy requires specific nonsubjective or “external” criteria. In this discussion I will focus on strong substantive theories.¹¹

⁹I take this general category distinction from the literature review in Mackenzie and Stoljar (eds.), *Relational Autonomy*, pp. 3-31.

¹⁰Trudy Govier, “Self-Trust, Autonomy, and Self-Esteem,” *Hypatia* 8 (1993): 99-120.

¹¹In addition to the Govier article, another example of a weak substantive approach is

Stoljar understands why some feminist theorists are drawn to a procedural approach. One feminist criticism of traditional autonomy theories is that these theories seem to require substantive independence and other “masculine” norms. In contrast, feminists want a theory of autonomy that can accommodate a wide range of preferences. For these reasons, many feminists find an approach to autonomy that does not rule out any specific preferences (the content neutrality of procedural theories) very attractive. Given feminist work on social construction, feminist autonomy theorists also want to develop a theory that can rule out as autonomous preferences that are the result of harmful forms of socialization. Most recent theories of autonomy admit that we are all products of our socialization (hence the name “relational autonomy”) and—in this sense—none of our preferences is completely “our own.” However, feminist autonomy theorists want to account for the difference between benign and pernicious forms of socialization. For example, Diana Meyers states:

The question is not whether to have a coercive or a noncoercive form of childhood socialization. Since there is no such thing as noncoercive childhood socialization, but since socialization is an inescapable feature of civilization, some form of coercive socialization must be justifiable. Indeed, it is not the coerciveness of socialization that generally draws fire. It is when socialization harms peoples that the process itself falls under suspicion.¹²

Thus, one question a feminist autonomy theorist must address is which types of socialization are acceptable and which are not.

Feminists who defend procedural theories believe they can adequately account for pernicious aspects of socialization in the procedure itself, thereby addressing feminist concerns but also keeping the content neutrality they cherish.¹³ Stoljar is skeptical about this approach.

Despite the apparent advantages, however, feminists should be cautious about adopting a purely procedural account of autonomy. In certain cases, even preferences satisfying the standards of critical reflection that are required by procedural accounts would still be

Carolyn McLeod, *Self-Trust and Reproductive Autonomy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002). Examples of strong substantive approaches include: Susan M. Babbitt, *Impossible Dreams: Rationality, Integrity, and Moral Imagination* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996); Wolf, “Asymmetrical Freedom.” For the moment, I avoid discussing weak substantive theories because I am not sure that the distinction between weak and strong substantive theories can be maintained. If we take seriously some of the added requirements included by weak substantive theorists, then those requirements seem to be doing most of the work (which makes the procedural requirement superfluous). Also, if we take them seriously enough, they indirectly rule out certain desires or reasons for acting in the same way strong substantive theories do. For example, could someone with sufficient self-respect autonomously adopt certain subservient beliefs influenced by oppressive socialization?

¹²Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*, p. 207.

¹³For examples, see Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*; Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*.

regarded as nonautonomous by many feminists. This is because such preferences are influenced by pernicious aspects of the oppressive context. They therefore attract what I call *the feminist intuition*, which claims that preferences influenced by oppressive norms of femininity cannot be autonomous.¹⁴

Stoljar questions whether the “pernicious aspects of [an] oppressive context” can be adequately captured and filtered out by a formal procedure. She believes that many feminists rightly question the autonomy of some decisions even if they appear to be in keeping with preferences that were reflectively endorsed. She calls this skepticism “the feminist intuition”—the idea that “preferences influenced by oppressive norms” cannot be autonomous. Stoljar argues that the only way to adequately address the feminist intuition is to adopt a substantive approach to autonomy theory. I agree.

Although preferences could be influenced by oppressive norms in a variety of ways, I will focus on internalized oppression. In this paper, I will argue that the only way to adequately address the problem of internalized oppression is with a substantive theory of autonomy. This is because procedural theories rely only on the subjective perspective,¹⁵ but we cannot articulate (and thereby rule out) what is pernicious about some forms of socialization with a purely formal procedure that remains committed to the subjective perspective. I argue that decisions resulting from false beliefs that rely on subordinating reasoning and perpetuate oppression should not count as autonomous. However, this uses nonsubjective or external criteria to decide what counts as autonomous.

Using the criteria just outlined, I will argue that decisions that reflect a certain devaluation of self (or lack of self-worth) should not count as autonomous. This troubles procedural theorists because it violates the content neutrality they cherish. Procedural theorists are committed to content neutrality because they are committed to the subjective perspec-

¹⁴Stoljar, “Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition,” p. 95.

¹⁵Many feminist approaches to autonomy have focused on what is called relational autonomy. In these approaches, theorists discuss how autonomy is developed and expressed in a social context. For example, Meyers identifies a list of skills necessary for making autonomous decisions that she calls “autonomy competencies.” In this way, many feminist theorists try to account for nonsubjective or external influences on autonomy. However, those theorists who remain committed to the procedural approach will still fall back on the internal decision-making procedure of reflection and endorsement when considering whether a specific decision is or is not autonomous. This is problematic when trying to account for internalized oppression because a key aspect of internalized oppression is that it distorts a person’s preferences. I will say more about internalized oppression and the procedure for autonomous decision-making later in the paper. Here I simply want to acknowledge that feminist theorists committed to the procedural approach do discuss some nonsubjective or external influences on autonomy. However, my argument is that their analysis of these external factors is not sufficiently integrated into their procedure for autonomous decision-making.

tive; therefore, they argue that any decision stemming from the appropriate internal decision-making process (as outlined above) should count as autonomous. Thus, procedural theorists would argue that my substantive theory unduly restricts the scope of autonomy or the range of decisions that would count as autonomous.

Can Subservient Wives Be Autonomous?

Case 1: The Deferential Wife

To understand better why feminists need a substantive theory of autonomy, consider Thomas Hill's classic example of the Deferential Wife. As Hill describes her:

This is a woman who is utterly devoted to serving her husband. She buys the clothes *he* prefers, invites the guests *he* wants to entertain, and makes love whenever *he* is in the mood ... She loves her husband, but her conduct is not simply an expression of love. She is happy, but she does not subordinate herself as a means to happiness. She does not simply defer to her husband in certain spheres as a trade-off for his deference in other spheres. On the contrary, she tends not to form her own interests, values, and ideals; and, when she does, she counts them as less important than her husband's. She readily responds to appeals from Women's Liberation that she agrees that women are mentally and physically equal, if not superior, to men. She just believes that the proper role for a woman is to serve her family. As a matter of fact, much of her happiness derives from her belief that she fulfills this role very well. No one is trampling on her rights, she says; for she is quite glad, and proud, to serve her husband as she does.¹⁶

Most feminists would agree that Hill is describing a classic case of internalized oppression. Despite her stated belief that men and women are equal, her behavior and her belief that "the proper role of women is to serve the family" illustrate how she has internalized oppressive norms of femininity.¹⁷ Using this example, I will illustrate the difference between a feminist procedural approach to autonomy and my substantive approach.

In *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, Marilyn Friedman gives us a feminist example of a procedural approach to autonomy. According to Friedman, if a person's choices and actions are to be autonomous, she must reflect on her wants and values—choosing to endorse some and, presumably, reject others. Also, a person's decisions should reflect those wants and values she has endorsed (or what is important to her). In sum, Friedman

¹⁶Thomas E. Hill, Jr., *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 5-6 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷For examples of how feminine norms can feel empowering at the same time as they are perpetuating women's (including the individual woman's) oppression, see Bartky's analysis of emotional caring and both Bartky's and Meyers's analysis of feminine beauty norms. Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*; Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror*.

is advocating the process of critical reflection as I have described it. Friedman, like other procedural theorists, also emphasizes content neutrality.¹⁸ The only constraint she puts on the process of reflection is that it must be “relatively unimpeded by conditions, such as coercion, deception, and manipulation.”¹⁹ Let us compare an earlier analysis Friedman made of Hill’s Deferential Wife to her more recent theory of autonomy.

Hill argues that certain forms of servility are wrong because a person ignores her worth as an equal moral being. Friedman agrees that some forms of servility are wrong, but disagrees with Hill’s reasoning. Specifically, Friedman argues that it would be okay for a woman to defer to her husband’s preferences if (a) in doing so his preferences become her preferences and (b) she does so without violating her own moral ideals or principles. Friedman claims that if a woman believes it is her duty to serve her husband, then “this means that she takes the preferences of certain other persons *for her own*; they become *her* preferences as the result of a moral commitment on her part.”²⁰ Once a woman decides that it is her proper role to serve her husband, then his preferences become her preferences. Thus, according to Friedman, submitting to his preferences is a self-defining commitment. She also argues that the Deferential Wife’s servility is a problem only if she submits to her husband’s preferences uncritically, because this undermines her moral integrity. However, as long as the Deferential Wife submits only to those preferences that do not violate her own moral ideals or principles, then she can maintain her moral integrity, and thus her status as a moral being.²¹ Although she does not use the language of autonomy here, it seems that Friedman would have to argue that the Deferential Wife’s commitment to servility is also an autonomous decision as long as she does not submit to fulfilling her husband’s preferences “uncritically.”

In contrast, Marcia Baron defends Hill’s analysis and argues that Friedman’s argument misses the point about what is really wrong with this form of servility. Baron and Hill argue that what is wrong is not whether the Deferential Wife ultimately adopts her husband’s preferences or retains her moral integrity by not submitting to preferences that violate her moral ideals, but that her decision to submit to her husband in the first place is the problem.

The problem isn’t that I didn’t critically examine his preferences before deferring to them; critical examination of my *reasons* for deferring would be much more in order here

¹⁸Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, pp. 19-25.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁰Marilyn Friedman, “Moral Integrity and the Deferential Wife,” *Philosophical Studies* 47 (1985): 141-50, p. 144.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 145-47.

than scrutiny of the preferences. In short, the Deferential Wife's flaw can't be her failure to subject to scrutiny the preferences to which she defers.²²

In other words, the problem is not that the Deferential Wife failed to utilize the formal procedure for making autonomous decisions (or failed to put her beliefs through some process of self-reflection and endorsement), but it is the beliefs themselves (or her *reasons* for deferring) that spark the feminist intuition. It is the nature of the servility (i.e., deferring to her husband because it is a women's proper role) that raises the feminist intuition, because it expresses oppressive norms of femininity. Indeed, Baron and Hill argue that the problem with the Deferential Wife's servility is that she does not understand herself as an equal moral being, and, as Hill argues, "consent resulting from underestimation of one's moral status is not autonomously given."²³

I believe that Baron's and Hill's analysis more accurately captures the feminist intuition. It is the nature of the servility that raises the feminist intuition, because it also replicates oppressive norms of femininity. In sketching out how a substantive theory of autonomy would approach this problem, I try to articulate Baron's and Hill's intuition in a more methodical way. The Deferential Wife has false beliefs (i.e., that women's "proper role" is to serve their family) that rely on subordinating reasoning (i.e., it is the wife's duty to subsume her preferences to her husband's) and that perpetuate her own oppression (e.g., reinforcing restrictive roles for women and undermining women's equality).²⁴

Let me be clear that I am *not* arguing that women could never autonomously choose to be stay-at-home wives or defer to their partners in some things or situations.²⁵ I am arguing that some forms of servility and deference cannot be autonomous—namely, those that are the result of internalized oppression. In sum, I am arguing that feminists need a strong substantive theory of autonomy that assesses both the specific beliefs influencing a person's decision and how those beliefs relate to the broader social context. I am arguing that false beliefs that rely on subordinating reasoning *and* perpetuate oppressive systems are forms of interna-

²²Marcia Baron, "Servility, Critical Deference, and the Deferential Wife," *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985): 393-400, p. 398.

²³Hill, *Autonomy and Self-Respect*, p. 13.

²⁴For examples of how this form of traditional gender roles perpetuates women's oppression (including the individual woman's oppression), see Linda R. Hirshman, *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World* (New York: Viking, 2006); Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

²⁵In our current society, though, any choice to stay home will be suspect given not only gender norms, but also economic pressures. However, since my focus in this paper is internalized oppression, I will not pursue the potentially coercive effects of other forms of oppression. For a discussion of other forms of oppression, see Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*.

lized oppression, and therefore decisions that result from these beliefs should not count as autonomous.

I do not believe that all false beliefs are a problem. Consider a baseball player who believes he must wear his lucky socks to win a game. Many of us would consider this a false belief, but I do not think it would raise the feminist intuition. It is a rather benign belief and it is unlikely to be the result of “pernicious forms of socialization.” We could also have subordinating beliefs that do not contribute to an oppressive system. Consider a committed activist who chooses to defer decisions and public attention to a charismatic leader. This is a type of subordination, but not necessarily a pernicious one. If we put these together, we can see that what raises the feminist intuition are subordinating beliefs that perpetuate oppression. Therefore, we must look at how a belief or reasons for a belief situate groups in relation to each other. I believe that this is what raises the feminist intuition and leads some feminists to argue that these decisions are *not* autonomous.

Case 2: The Surrendered Wife

Let us return to the debate over the Deferential Wife, but use a real-life example. In 2001, Laura Doyle published *The Surrendered Wife*. According to Doyle, “The underlying principle of *The Surrendered Wife* is simple: the control women wield at work and with children must be left at the front door of any marriage to revitalize intimacy.”²⁶ Her book has received a number of positive reviews and substantial media coverage. She continues to give public talks supporting her philosophy and, according to at least one news special in 2007, more than 100,000 women have adopted her program. Although Doyle claims that this is not about subservience, she does compare it to ballroom dancing, where one person must lead (the husband) and the other must follow (the wife). Also, the point of “surrendering” is that the woman gives up control (specifically of the finances and her opinions) and learns to trust her husband.²⁷ In the news reports of specific couples who have adopted this approach, the wife does everything from drawing her husband’s bath, to having him approve her list of daily chores, to giving him complete control over when they have sex.²⁸ In this way, the women are very similar to Hill’s Deferential Wife who submits to her husband’s every wish and whim. In other words, a woman’s decision to become a Surrendered Wife raises the feminist intuition.

²⁶Laura Doyle, *The Surrendered Wife* (2001; accessed March 19, 2009); www.surrenderedwife.com.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Peter Harvey, *Under the Thumb* (2007; accessed March 19, 2009); <http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=270407>.

There are a number of ways to interpret the decision to become a Surrendered Wife. To clarify my position, I will consider three—the kind of oppressive norms reflected in this decision, the nature of the subordination, and what this case tells us about the relationship between oppressive socialization and the procedure for autonomy.

First, many of the women who “choose” to become a Surrendered Wife seem to be motivated by the desire to save the relationship at the expense of other desires.²⁹ In response to a question about why she chose to become a Surrendered Wife, Caroline says, “I was getting to the point in my marriage where I wasn’t happy. And Chip and I were not getting along at all and we were talking about maybe just me going and doing my own thing.” Similarly, the statements made by many of these women imply that it was easier to acquiesce than to keep fighting with their husbands. For example, Doyle says, “My loneliness was so acute I was willing to try anything to cure it ... Fortunately, the steps of surrendering helped me with both marital tranquility and self-respect.”³⁰ Here we have presumably competent, independent women who found their relationships in trouble. Rather than forgo the relationship, they chose to “surrender” their equality. Obviously it is impossible to know all the reasons each woman made these choices, but the fact that so many independent women would “choose” to give up independence rather than be single raises my feminist intuition.

Also, once the women “chose” to become Surrendered Wives, they seem to adopt a variety of negative female stereotypes that are the result of oppressive norms of femininity. For example, Caroline says, “Shutting my mouth is kind of very hard. That’s been the hardest for me but I’ve learned to do it.”³¹ I argue that statements like this show a subtle form of internalized oppression—namely, the idea that women should not be overly opinionated or at least not assertive about expressing their opinions or beliefs. Consider another quote from Doyle: “None of us feels good about ourselves when we’re nagging, critical, or controlling. I certainly didn’t. The tone of my voice alone would make me cringe with self-recrimination. Through surrendering, you will find the courage to gradually stop indulging in these unpleasant behaviors and replace them with dignified ones.”³² Again, this sounds like a woman who is motivated by oppressive norms of femininity—namely, that women should be quiet, passive, and unopinionated instead of assertive and in control of their lives.³³

²⁹I thank Allyson Robichaud for this insight.

³⁰Doyle, *The Surrendered Wife*.

³¹Harvey, *Under the Thumb*.

³²Doyle, *The Surrendered Wife*.

³³I should point out that Doyle centers her theory around women’s need to control men. I admit that many in our culture are taught to obsess about what others are doing or

Taken together, these quotes show that many women are motivated by oppressive norms of femininity when deciding to become a Surrendered Wife. To explain why we should not consider decisions that are the result of oppressive norms of femininity autonomous, I attempt to clarify what is problematic about these decisions. They rely on false beliefs (e.g., assertive women are “shrewish”) that lead to subordination (e.g., wife allows husband to control daily decisions) and perpetuate oppression (e.g., reinforce negative stereotypes, leave women vulnerable, and so on). I further claim that this is another way to interpret Hill’s and Baron’s claim that the problem with the Deferential Wife is that she underestimates her worth as an equal moral being. To elaborate on this point, I turn to my second interpretation of the Surrendered Wife phenomenon.

Another way to understand what is problematic about the decision to become a Surrendered Wife is to consider what “surrendering” entails or the nature of the subordination. Autonomy theorists have long argued about whether one could “autonomously” choose to submit to slavery or the idea of how much autonomy you can willingly relinquish. To help explain where I draw the line and why, I compare my interpretation to Marina Oshana’s theory of autonomy.³⁴

Oshana criticizes what she calls “internalist” or “psychological” theories of autonomy (what I call procedural), and instead proposes an “externalist” or “socio-relational” theory of autonomy (what I call substantive). Oshana’s approach is similar to mine in that we both argue that you cannot fully articulate what counts as autonomous from only the subjective (or internal) view. However, Oshana and I differ on how we should interpret external constraints or the interplay between internal and external aspects of autonomy. Oshana argues that certain external constraints undermine autonomy because they take away a person’s ability to control her life.³⁵ Based on this argument, Oshana argues that a monk has relinquished his autonomy because he has given control over his life to another.³⁶ I dis-

not doing and try to control them in various ways. For a good analysis of power-with instead of this type of power-over, see Sarah Lucia Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Values* (Palo Alto, Cal.: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988); Starhawk, *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990). However, Doyle’s analysis is very different from Hoagland’s or Starhawk’s. Rather than discussing how we should reframe disagreements and our attitudes toward others, Doyle claims that we should replace women trying to control men with men controlling (or as she puts it “leading”) women and the family.

³⁴Marina Oshana, *Personal Autonomy in Society* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006).

³⁵In this paper, I am mainly concerned with internalized oppression, so my emphasis is on “pernicious forms of socialization.” Admittedly, oppression in general can take other forms, such as economic deprivation or political marginalization. As such, it is possible that other external constraints might also undermine autonomy. For the sake of space, I will not deal with those here.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 62-64.

agree. I believe you can make an autonomous decision to submit yourself to another's authority in certain circumstances. What makes the Surrendered Wife's decision problematic in a way that the monk's decision is not is that her decision reflects internalized social norms that devalue her worth as a moral being. In contrast, barring any extenuating circumstances, there is no reason to believe the monk's decision was motivated by internalized oppressive norms. In fact, part of his motivation could be the enhanced social standing he will receive as a result of his decision.³⁷ In this way, the Surrendered Wife raises the feminist intuition in a way that the monk does not.

I believe the two interpretations outlined above are enough to explain why the Surrendered Wife's decision should not count as autonomous. In my third interpretation, I return to the question of why a substantive theory is better able to address the feminist intuition than procedural theories. Here I will perform a more in-depth analysis to show why procedural autonomy theories have trouble with this sort of example or why a substantive theory is necessary for feminist autonomy theorists.

What would a procedural autonomy theorist say about a woman's decision to become a Surrendered Wife? All of the women quoted earlier made an active decision to change the parameters of their relationships. Therefore, they had to have some level of self-reflection when making this radical shift in their behavior and lifestyle. Doyle admits that she is constantly struggling to live up to her ideal of the Surrendered Wife which implies that she continues to reflect on her decision. Many of the other women seem to imply a similar sort of reflection and active decision-making. Skye says about her pre-surrendered wife relationship: "I would say I was trying to rule the roost, I was trying to take over, I was like, 'Hey, I don't think you know how things work around here, pal. I don't think you quite get that I'm the boss here' and that's the way it works in relationships." In contrast, here is how Skye feels about being a Surrendered Wife: "I've discovered through experience, doing it for three years, that usually if I had done it the way that I was going to do it, it wouldn't have turned out as great as it did when he made the decision. He wears the trousers, absolutely, without a shadow of the doubt. I wouldn't have it any other way."³⁸ Based on these comments, I believe that the women would pass a procedural theorist's criteria for an autonomous decision.

To show why procedural theorists would have to consider the Surrendered Wife's decision autonomous, I return to Friedman's theory of

³⁷Granted, the monk may be humble before God, but he will still hold a position of prominence in the church.

³⁸Harvey, *Under the Thumb*.

autonomy. In *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, Friedman considers whether romantic love is a threat to women's autonomy. In her discussion of romantic love, Friedman admits that women are subject to social pressures that devalue women's autonomy, belittle women's aspirations that do not include caring for others, and encourage women to subsume their values and beliefs to love relationships regardless of whether that is their primary concern.³⁹ She further acknowledges that (because of these social pressures) heterosexual romantic love poses a greater threat to women's autonomy than men's autonomy. Yet, Friedman claims that as long as a woman has made the relationship her self-defining value, then sustaining that relationship *is* an expression of autonomy for her.

The relationship now is, by definition, the woman's overriding concern for which she will sacrifice other important values ... As such, it is a self-defining commitment for her. By acting in accord with that commitment, a woman does not actually give up autonomy; instead she shows a significant *degree* of it. Thus a woman who values her relationships more than she values autonomy, and who acts to maintain her romantic relationship, becomes autonomous after all.⁴⁰

According to Friedman, the woman must use some level of self-reflection in making her decision. Obviously, the Surrendered Wives are reflective about their decision. Similarly, Friedman argues that once women take on the relationship (or in this case being a Surrendered Wife) as a self-defining commitment, then living up to that commitment is an expression of their autonomy. Again, these comments show that the women have embraced the role of the Surrendered Wife. In sum, I believe Friedman would have to consider the decisions to become a Surrendered Wife autonomous.

If the love relationship is this woman's self-defining commitment and a reflection of her autonomy, then we must assume (by Friedman's own definition of autonomy) that this value had to be put through some process of self-reflection that was not the result of coercion or manipulation. The question we can now ask is: Do the social pressures Friedman acknowledges add up to coercion, deception, and manipulation? Stoljar claims that feminists will question whether preferences influenced by oppressive norms of femininity can be autonomous. In her procedural account of autonomy, Friedman acknowledges the influence of feminine socialization on personal preferences, but she does not go on to explain how the procedure for autonomous decision-making can rule out preferences developed through oppressive socialization as autonomous.⁴¹ For

³⁹Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, p. 132.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴¹Friedman does go on to add that a woman can autonomously choose to make the relationship her self-defining commitment "so long as her efforts to maintain it do not

example, do oppressive social influences skew the process of critical reflection?

Friedman begins with an analysis of social pressures, but ends by claiming that values reflectively endorsed are autonomous. As Stoljar points out, “The question for all theories of autonomy is what kinds of socialization are incompatible with autonomy.”⁴² To understand why oppressive socialization is problematic in a way that nonoppressive socialization is not, we need to look more closely at how it (potentially) skews the process of critical reflection (or the exact question Friedman avoids). Along with Stoljar, I believe we can adequately address this problem only by using a strong substantive theory. To show how a strong substantive theory can begin to deal with the problem of internalized oppression (and further illustrate the problem with procedural theories), I turn to the work of Paul Benson.

In “Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization,” Benson attempts to give “an explanation of the autonomy-inhibiting effects of some socialization while sustaining the nonskeptical conclusion that a good deal of our socialization, though it influences us profoundly, need not interfere with autonomy.”⁴³ Like Meyers, Benson agrees that we cannot escape the influence of socialization. The key is to find a way to distinguish between pernicious and benign socialization. Benson uses the example of feminine beauty norms to argue that feminine socialization causes women to internalize oppressive norms—namely, the idea that women should make themselves physically appealing to men. He further argues that these norms undermine women’s autonomy because they cause women to internalize false beliefs (such as that their worth is tied to their attractiveness to men) and keeps them from being able to “critically evaluate” these false beliefs.

I have suggested that feminine socialization gains much of its power by operating to deceive many women about the significance that cultivating an appearance which is pleasing to men has for women’s worth as persons. Women’s autonomy is reduced to the extent that they are socially trained to be blind to the reasons there are for them to regard their appearance differently than the norms of femininity recommend.⁴⁴

In his substantive theory, Benson adds a critical competence criterion that requires an autonomous person to be able to “detect and appreciate

themselves involve sacrifices of her autonomy in other ways” (ibid., pp. 137-38). Specifically, the woman must have and periodically use some autonomy skills. At this point, we could ask whether Friedman is sneaking substantive requirements into her procedural theory. To avoid confusion, I will not pursue this question here.

⁴²Stoljar, “Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition,” p. 97.

⁴³Benson, “Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization,” p. 386.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 403.

the reasons there are to act in various ways.”⁴⁵ He argues that feminine socialization concerning feminine beauty norms undermines this critical competence.⁴⁶

While I am not convinced that Benson adequately distinguishes between pernicious and benign forms of socialization,⁴⁷ his analysis does help articulate what is wrong with a procedural approach. Benign and pernicious socialization can influence the process of critical reflection in the same way. Later in the article, Benson admits that men as well as women internalize cultural standards for feminine beauty norms and as a result men “may be blinded systematically to important reasons there are for them to treat women differently.”⁴⁸ Yet, Benson also admits that this socialization does not undermine men’s autonomy in the same way it undermines women’s. I believe this is because the real problem with oppressive socialization is not that it undermines critical competence or unduly narrows the reasons for action we will consider (many forms of socialization can do this). What is truly harmful about internalized oppression is the way it undermines a person’s sense of self-worth, and thereby makes her complicit in her own oppression.⁴⁹

We could make an analogy here between the procedure for autonomous decision-making and cooking chicken and dumplings. Most recent theories of autonomy acknowledge that individuals are embedded in a social context, and as a result will internalize a variety of social norms. Similarly, I begin the process of cooking chicken and dumplings by combining a variety of ingredients—vegetables, chicken, broth, and spices. After combining the ingredients, I let them simmer so that the various flavors mingle and infuse each other. Allowing my dish to simmer is similar to the process of reflection used by procedural theorists. The individual considers preferences, but only from within her social context. Her social context and personal history (the ingredients put into

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 397.

⁴⁶Benson does not argue that all feminine socialization does this or that any woman who chooses to adhere to feminine beauty norms lacks critical competence. His example assumes that the young woman accepts these norms and would not reject them even if they were put through a process of reflection that pointed out how feminine beauty norms were tied to a system that serves men’s interest. In other words, she has internalized norms that connect her beauty to her personal worth and cannot critically reflect on the larger reasons for action or reasons why she might wish to reject or resist those norms.

⁴⁷In fairness, Benson has significantly revised his approach since this early article, and, as I will mention later, I believe some of his later work more accurately captures the nature of the problem.

⁴⁸Benson, “Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization,” p. 403.

⁴⁹Benson more accurately articulates this problem of a lack of self-worth in later articles. See Paul Benson, “Feeling Crazy: Self-Worth and the Social Character of Responsibility,” in Mackenzie and Stoljar (eds.), *Relational Autonomy*, pp. 72-93; Benson, “Free Agency and Self-Worth.”

the mix) will influence the process of reflection. Moreover, her various preferences will influence each other (in the way various ingredients infuse each other with their distinct flavors). After simmering for a while, I must strain out bones and other unwanted “bits.” In this way, I keep what I want in the dish, but get rid of what I do not want. Similarly, procedural theorists believe the process of critical reflection allows the individual to “strain out” unwanted preferences while solidifying her commitment to the ones that are left.

Returning to the problem of oppressive versus nonoppressive socialization, my argument is that they function in the same way in the procedure for autonomous decision-making. The process of reflection and identification proceeds in the same way for every internalized norm just as the process of making chicken and dumplings will proceed in the same way (combining ingredients, simmering, and straining the final product), no matter what ingredients are put in. However, I can make the dish inedible by adding poison—for example, arsenic. The arsenic does not disrupt the *process* of making chicken and dumplings, but it makes the final dish inedible. In addition, to understand why I should not add this ingredient to my dish, I have to understand the relationship between certain substances and human metabolism, not the mechanics of simmering and straining broths. I need to know something “outside” of the recipe or my understanding of how to prepare this dish. Similarly, we cannot strain or filter out oppressive norms using only a formal procedure for autonomous decision-making. To understand what feminists find problematic about internalized oppressive norms (or why they should not be considered autonomous), we have to understand their relationship to other norms and how they position the individual in her social context. In other words, we need nonsubjective criteria.

Thus, Benson’s critical competence addition to the process of critical reflection is not enough. All socialization restricts options in this way. Given our previous histories and socialization, we are not open to all reasons for action, nor would this be a good thing.⁵⁰ In this way, both oppressive and nonoppressive socialization shape critical reflection in the same way. What is problematic about oppressive socialization is that it undermines a person’s sense of self-worth. This *indirectly* skews the process of critical reflection in a problematic way, because a person uses oppressive norms (that degrade her status as a human being) to make certain decisions. In other words, precisely what is wrong with these decisions is that they rely on internalized oppressive norms. Benson more

⁵⁰For an account of how not restricting options can derail rational decision-making, see Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

accurately captures this problem when he discusses the nature of the false belief (or how women are taught to tie feminine beauty norms to their personal worth). However, we cannot see this problem or fully articulate it unless we step outside of the subjective perspective. Just because a person chooses to do X does not make it nonautonomous. If we consider that a person chooses to do X for reason Y and reason Y is an internalized norm that perpetuates oppression, then my substantive theory of autonomy would rule it out as autonomous.⁵¹

To summarize, the strong substantive approach I am advocating would analyze not just the self-reflective part of the decision-making process, but also how various desires or beliefs that motivate these decisions are or are not influenced by pernicious forms of socialization. In her analysis, Stoljar analyzes a study of women and contraceptive risk-taking completed by Kristen Luker. Stoljar argues that women's contraceptive choices

are judged to be nonautonomous because they are overly influenced in their decisions about contraception by stereotypical and incorrect norms of femininity and sexual agency. Unlike risk-takers in other domains, such as those who smoke or fail to wear safety belts in a car, Luker's subjects are motivated by oppressive and misguided norms that are internalized as a result of feminine socialization.⁵²

Similarly, I believe the Surrendered Wives are "motivated by oppression and misguided norms that are internalized as a result of feminine socialization." The decision to become a Surrendered Wife meets the criteria I outlined earlier—it is the result of false beliefs that rely on subordinating reasoning (i.e., women should "surrender" or be subordinate to their husbands) and perpetuate oppressive systems (i.e., the devaluing of women). However, we can articulate how these particular decisions are an example of internalized oppression only by stepping outside of the subjective perspective. Therefore, we can capture what is truly wrong (or nonautonomous) about these decisions only with a strong substantive theory of autonomy.

As I mentioned earlier, procedural theorists are committed to content neutrality because they do not want to rule out traditionally "feminine" values or goals as autonomous. While I applaud this goal, I worry that if we acknowledge oppressive social pressures without adequately analyzing how they influence autonomy, then we will be left with a theory of autonomy that is too generous. I worry that if we ignore the feminist intuition and call these cases autonomous, we will end up devaluing part of the harm of internalized oppression—namely, how it denigrates a person and makes her complicit in perpetuating her own oppression.

⁵¹Benson also acknowledges this distinction.

⁵²Stoljar, "Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition," p. 98.

Addressing Procedural Theorists' Concerns

As we can see from the previous section, adopting a substantive theory of autonomy will narrow the scope of decisions that count as autonomous by applying more rigorous standards, while procedural theories of autonomy include a broader range of decisions. One reason procedural autonomy theorists reject substantive autonomy theories is that they worry about how substantive theories might narrow the scope of autonomy. This is why procedural theorists are committed to content neutrality and the subjective perspective. One criticism that feminist philosophers made of traditional theories of autonomy is that they included masculine norms or required substantive independence. In response, feminist autonomy theorists wanted to create a conception of autonomy that included a broad range of lives, goals, and preferences. Thus, many procedural theorists worry that if we include nonsubjective criteria into autonomy we will again unduly restrict the scope of autonomy. In response, I would emphasize that we are talking about specific decisions, not entire lives. If we decide that decisions and actions that are the result of internalized oppression should not count as autonomous, then this does not mean that we believe individuals making these decisions have no autonomy. For example, an individual woman might be perfectly autonomous in her decisions about what career to pursue and whether or not to get married, but not autonomous in her decision to have a baby or get cosmetic surgery.

Procedural theorists also worry that the kind of criteria substantive autonomy theorists, like myself, want to include will overemphasize women's victimhood, and thereby ignore women's agency. For example, in her critique of Paul Benson's and Susan Babbitt's theories, Diana Meyers states: "Restrictive, value-saturated accounts of autonomy are troubling because they promiscuously stigmatize women as victims and because they homogenize authentic selves and autonomous lives."⁵³ On the other hand, I worry that procedural autonomy theorists are too generous. If we call decisions influenced by oppressive socialization "autonomous," then do we devalue the harm of internalized oppression?⁵⁴ I

⁵³Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror*, p. 16.

⁵⁴As an aside, Meyers also briefly mentions this problem in her discussion of "value-neutral accounts." She claims that they often "make inadequate provision for 'authenticating' the concepts and commitments that structure one's interpretations and propel one's deliberations and choices" (ibid., p. 13). She believes her theory is a good middle ground. I agree that Meyers engages the feminist literature on social construction more than other feminist procedural theorists and also takes seriously the problem of internalized oppression. However, Meyers is also still committed to a procedural theory. As such, I believe her solutions or discussions of how these problems are ultimately handled by her theory of autonomy encounter many of the same problems I outline in this paper.

believe “autonomy” *should* be held to a higher standard. However, I believe the implications of this are less far-reaching than procedural autonomy theorists believe. Similar to Baron and Hill, I am not interested in “blaming” the Deferential Wife or the Surrendered Wife for her decision. Nor do I believe arguing that many decisions are nonautonomous means we should not allow people to make them. As a society, we regularly allow people to make all kinds of stupid or self-destructive decisions. Instead, we can separate how we categorize specific decisions from discussions about what decisions people should be allowed to make.

In “The Kantian Conception of Autonomy,” Thomas Hill distinguishes between what he calls “autonomy as a right” and a “psychological conception of autonomy.”⁵⁵ A psychological conception of autonomy means that a person “has a kind of independence of judgment which young children and unthinking conformists lack.”⁵⁶ This is the conception of autonomy debated by personal autonomy theorists. In contrast, autonomy as a right has to do with the range of decisions a person is allowed to make.

To be an autonomous person, on this view [autonomy as a right], is to have a moral right to make certain decisions for oneself, to control certain aspects of one’s life without interference. The working analogy here, apparently, is with autonomous states, which are such not because they are governed in a particularly effective or high-minded way but because they have a right that other nations not interfere in their internal affairs.⁵⁷

If we accentuate this distinction, then we can have a more rigorous theory of personal or psychological autonomy (which more adequately accommodates the problem of internalized oppression) without undermining other feminist goals (e.g., it preserves autonomy as a right).⁵⁸

Arguing that women should have autonomy as a right (by which I mean being allowed to fully participate in political and social systems and being allowed to make certain decisions about their own lives) does not require that I commit myself to a specific theory of personal auton-

For a fuller discussion of why I believe this is the case, see Sonya Charles, “The Limits of ‘Autonomy’ for Feminist Theory,” Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 2006.

⁵⁵We might also characterize this as the difference between liberty and autonomy. See Thomas E. Hill, Jr., “The Kantian Conception of Autonomy,” in John Christman (ed.), *The Inner Citadel: Essays on Individual Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 91-105.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵⁸Indeed, I believe a more rigorous theory of personal autonomy could be useful to feminist theorists. As Diana Meyers points out, our understanding of autonomy can have implications for our understanding of justice. If we believe autonomy is a good thing and it requires certain skills and self-reflexive attitudes, then just societies will help foster these skills and attitudes. Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*, pp. 247-63.

omy. I can remain agnostic about what personal autonomy actually requires. To argue for autonomy as a right is to argue that similar groups should face similar limits. In other words, I can argue that women (and other subordinated groups) should be allowed to participate equally in the institution of limits (such as laws and customs) without committing myself to a specific theory of personal autonomy. The argument here is that in a given society, autonomy as a right (or the control over your life given to individuals) should be the same for all adults regardless of race, sex, and so on. In this way, autonomy as a right raises questions of justice. In contrast, personal or psychological autonomy seems to raise different (if related) questions that can be dealt with separately.⁵⁹

In sum, feminist autonomy theorists should not fear strong substantive theories of autonomy. Procedural theorists are correct that strong substantive theories would narrow the scope of decisions that count as autonomous. However, I hope I have shown that this is not the problem they fear it to be. If feminists embrace the distinction between autonomy as a right and psychological autonomy, we can continue to argue against oppressive norms that restrict women's freedom and control over their lives while we continue to work on a more adequate theory of personal autonomy.⁶⁰

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⁵⁹I realize that liberal theorists often base justifications of individual autonomy rights on presuppositions that individuals are capable of being autonomous. Still I believe we can (to a degree) separate these questions. After all, in our day-to-day lives we do not require people to pass autonomy tests before they exercise their rights to autonomy.

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