

Autonomy and Gender: A Synthesis of Existential and Feminist Philosophies

Autonomy is a cornerstone of existential philosophy, which asserts that individuals are fundamentally free to define their destinies and essence through actions. This ideal, however, often clashes with societal structures, particularly gender norms, which shape and sometimes limit individual freedom. Baggini's exploration of autonomy across different cultures provides insight into how existential freedom is perceived globally. He emphasizes that "autonomy is not a universally identical concept but is understood and valued differently across cultures" (Baggini, 2018). This diversity in understanding autonomy aligns with Beauvoir's critique of gendered constraints on freedom, highlighting that while existentialism promotes the idea of self-creation, societal structures, particularly patriarchal ones, often impede this freedom for women. This essay explores the intersection of existentialism and feminist philosophy, focusing on how societal constructs, especially those related to gender, impact personal autonomy. Drawing from Julian Baggini's *How the World Thinks* and integrating existential and feminist theoretical frameworks, it is evident that personal autonomy is fundamentally intertwined with social context, and achieving true freedom requires dismantling the gendered structures that constrain it.

Existential philosophy, as articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre, posits that "existence precedes essence," suggesting that individuals are born without predetermined purposes and must create their essence through choices and actions. Sartre's assertion that "man is condemned to be free" underscores the weight of individual responsibility in defining one's essence (Sartre, 1946). However, Simone de Beauvoir, in her landmark work *The Second Sex*, elaborates that this freedom is not equally accessible to all. For many women, systemic patriarchal barriers limit this existential freedom. Beauvoir argues, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," highlighting how societal expectations shape women's identities (Beauvoir, 1949). Baggini's exploration of autonomy across different cultures provides a backdrop for understanding these philosophical concepts within a broader, global context. Baggini notes that "autonomy is not a universally identical concept but is understood and valued differently across cultures" (Baggini, 2018). This section delves into these foundational theories, setting the stage for a discussion on how they intersect with feminist critiques of gendered societal expectations.

Existential autonomy within the framework of cultural differences in understanding self and society, as presented by Baggini, contrasts the Western emphasis on individualism with Eastern philosophies that stress relational or communal aspects of selfhood. Baggini states, "In many Eastern traditions, the self is not seen as an isolated entity but as fundamentally interconnected

with others" (Baggini, 2018). This cultural distinction is pivotal for understanding the gendered dimensions of autonomy.

Feminist aesthetics, which challenge the traditional philosophical assumptions about art and beauty, reveal how cultural perceptions influence gender norms and, subsequently, personal autonomy. For instance, institutional barriers in the arts, such as limited access to education and exhibition opportunities for women, restrict their ability to define themselves as artists. Nochlin argues that these barriers prevent women from achieving the same recognition as men, thereby limiting their existential autonomy. She writes, "The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education" (Nochlin, 1971). This critique underscores how societal structures can impede the self-definition and autonomy that existentialism champions. Feminist philosopher Linda Nochlin, in her seminal essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", critiques the societal structures that have historically limited women's opportunities in the arts (Nochlin, 1971). Nochlin's analysis demonstrates how gendered expectations and institutional barriers have restricted women's autonomy, echoing broader existential concerns about freedom and self-definition.

In Japanese culture, the concept of *amae* (dependency) plays a crucial role in understanding social relationships and autonomy. *Amae* refers to the presumption of benevolence and indulgence from others, particularly in close relationships. This communal approach contrasts sharply with Western individualism. Dussel's philosophy of liberation emphasizes that true autonomy cannot be achieved without addressing social and economic injustices that oppress marginalized groups. This perspective supports Beauvoir's assertion that freedom is constrained by societal structures. Similarly, Lugones' concept of "world-traveling" illustrates how women navigate multiple social worlds, each with its own constraints on autonomy. She writes, "Freedom is always situated within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape the possibilities for action" (Lugones, 2003). Both Dussel and Lugones challenge Sartre's notion of absolute freedom by highlighting the role of societal context in shaping autonomy. Philosopher Takeo Doi describes *amae* as a fundamental aspect of Japanese social structure, where dependency is seen as natural and acceptable. This view challenges the Western notion that autonomy must involve complete independence (Doi, 1973). Feminist scholars argue that recognizing such cultural variations can provide a more nuanced understanding of autonomy, one that accommodates interdependence without compromising personal freedom.

Latin American philosophy, particularly the philosophy of liberation, emphasizes the importance of social context in understanding autonomy. Enrique Dussel, a prominent figure in this tradition, argues that true autonomy cannot be achieved without addressing social and economic injustices that oppress marginalized groups. This perspective aligns with feminist critiques that highlight how systemic inequalities limit women's freedom. Latin American feminist philosophers like

María Lugones have further developed these ideas, advocating for an intersectional approach that considers race, class, and gender in the struggle for autonomy (Lugones, 2003).

By integrating existentialist and feminist theories with Baggini's cross-cultural insights, we can better understand how different cultural contexts influence the experience and expression of autonomy. For example, in many African cultures, the concept of Ubuntu emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within a community. Philosopher Michael Onyebuchi Eze explains that "a person is a person through other people" (Eze, 2010). This communal approach to selfhood challenges Western individualism and highlights how cultural contexts shape our understanding of autonomy.

Furthermore, feminist philosopher Uma Narayan argues that cross-cultural feminist engagement is essential for a nuanced understanding of gender and autonomy. Narayan states, "Feminist theory must take into account the diverse ways in which women's lives are shaped by cultural, economic, and political contexts" (Narayan, 1997). By incorporating cross-cultural perspectives, we can develop a more inclusive and comprehensive framework for understanding autonomy.

Using feminist philosophy, this essay explores the mechanisms through which societal norms and gender roles restrict existential autonomy. By incorporating feminist perspectives in aesthetics, the analysis highlights how "gender influences the formation of ideas about art, artists, and aesthetic value," showing that these influences extend to broader societal roles and expectations (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021). Beauvoir's discussion of women's historical relegation to the role of the 'Other' exemplifies how societal constructs can limit existential choices. Beauvoir writes, "The category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself" (Beauvoir, 1949). This relegation has profound implications for women's autonomy, as it positions them as secondary to men in social, economic, and cultural spheres.

Feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young's concept of "the five faces of oppression"—exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence—provides a framework for understanding the multifaceted ways in which gendered constraints operate (Young, 1990). By examining these constraints through a feminist lens, we can better appreciate the challenges women face in achieving true existential autonomy.

For instance, the exploitation of women's labor, both paid and unpaid, limits their economic independence and, consequently, their autonomy. Young argues, "Women are often relegated to lower-paying jobs and are expected to perform unpaid domestic labor, which restricts their freedom and opportunities for self-actualization" (Young, 1990). This economic exploitation is compounded by marginalization, where women are excluded from positions of power and decision-making processes.

Marginalization further limits autonomy by denying individuals access to resources and opportunities. Young explains that marginalized groups, including women, are often pushed to

the fringes of society, where their voices are ignored, and their potential is stifled. This systemic exclusion reinforces powerlessness, another face of oppression, which diminishes women's identity, their ability to act independently, and overall agency to make choices that affect their lives.

Moreover, cultural imperialism imposes dominant cultural norms that devalue women's experiences and contributions. Young explains, "Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" (Young, 1990). This process marginalizes women and other oppressed groups, further limiting their autonomy.

Feminist epistemology examines how knowledge production processes are influenced by social and power dynamics, particularly gender. Sandra Harding and Lorraine Code have highlighted how traditional epistemologies often marginalize women's experiences and ways of knowing. By challenging these epistemic injustices, feminist epistemology seeks to create more inclusive and representative knowledge systems. These efforts are directly related to autonomy, as access to knowledge and the ability to participate in its production are crucial components of personal freedom (Harding, 1991; Code, 1991). When women's ways of knowing are marginalized, their autonomy is constrained, as they are denied the intellectual agency to define and understand their own experiences fully. Feminist epistemology thus highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse perspectives to foster true autonomy.

The rise of digital technologies presents new challenges and opportunities for gender and autonomy. On one hand, digital platforms can amplify voices that have traditionally been marginalized, providing new avenues for self-expression and activism. For example, the #MeToo movement utilized social media to bring attention to widespread sexual harassment and assault, empowering women to share their experiences and demand justice. However, these same platforms can also perpetuate harassment and surveillance, limiting women's autonomy. Online harassment campaigns, such as those faced by feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, illustrate how digital spaces can become hostile environments that constrain women's freedom to express themselves and participate fully in public discourse (Sarkeesian, 2015). On the other hand, these technologies can also reinforce existing power structures and create new forms of surveillance and control. Feminist scholars like Anita Sarkeesian have explored how online harassment and misogyny limit women's participation in digital spaces, thereby constraining their autonomy (Sarkeesian, 2015). Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of how digital technologies intersect with gender and power.

Violence, both physical and psychological, is another significant constraint on women's autonomy. Feminist theorist Catharine MacKinnon highlights the pervasive nature of gender-based violence and its impact on women's freedom. MacKinnon states, "Sexual violence is a primary mechanism through which women's subordination is maintained" (MacKinnon,

1989). By addressing these gendered constraints, we can better understand the systemic barriers that limit women's existential autonomy.

This part of the essay applies the theoretical discussions to contemporary issues facing gender-diverse communities, demonstrating how existential and feminist philosophies intersect with modern struggles for autonomy and identity. It incorporates a primary source that revisits Sartre and Beauvoir's theories, applying them to the experiences of transgender individuals who navigate complex societal landscapes that challenge traditional gender norms. Philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher discusses the "epistemic injustice" faced by transgender individuals, highlighting how their identities are often invalidated or misunderstood by society (Bettcher, 2007).

The fight for LGBTQ+ rights is a contemporary example of how existential and feminist philosophies intersect. Legal and social recognition of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations is crucial for the autonomy of LGBTQ+ individuals. Philosopher Judith Butler's work on gender performativity has been influential in understanding how societal norms shape gender identity. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed attribute but a performance that is constantly negotiated and redefined through social interactions (Butler, 1990). This perspective aligns with existentialist views on self-creation and highlights the importance of challenging rigid gender norms to achieve true autonomy. Janet Mock's memoir, *Redefining Realness*, provides a powerful example of this process. Mock writes, "My path to womanhood was a constant negotiation between my inner truth and the external expectations imposed by society" (Mock, 2014). Her experiences as a transgender woman navigating societal norms underscore the existential struggle for self-definition and the need to dismantle restrictive gender expectations to achieve autonomy.

Global movements like #MeToo and Time's Up have also brought renewed attention to issues of gender inequality and autonomy. These movements have highlighted the pervasive nature of sexual harassment and violence and their impact on women's freedom and opportunities. By raising awareness and advocating for systemic change, these movements seek to dismantle the gendered power structures that limit autonomy. Feminist philosophers like bell hooks have emphasized the importance of intersectionality in these efforts, arguing that true liberation requires addressing multiple forms of oppression simultaneously (hooks, 2000).

By examining case studies of transgender individuals, this section explores how existentialist and feminist philosophies can offer insights into their experiences of autonomy and identity formation. The experiences of transgender activist Janet Mock, as detailed in her memoir, illustrate the struggle for self-definition in the face of societal norms (Mock, 2014). Her story exemplifies the challenges of navigating personal autonomy within a framework of rigid gender norms.

Additionally, the intersectionality framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw provides a valuable tool for understanding how multiple forms of oppression intersect to shape individual

experiences. Crenshaw explains, "Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects" (Crenshaw, 1991). By applying this framework to the experiences of gender-diverse individuals, we can better understand the complex interplay of gender, race, class, and other social categories in shaping autonomy.

A possible counterargument is the existentialist claim that individuals can transcend their circumstances through sheer will. Sartre famously asserted, "Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you" (Sartre, 1946). However, this essay rebuts such arguments by demonstrating that social structures, particularly gender norms, significantly shape the range of available existential choices. Drawing from feminist critiques, it argues that ignoring these structural influences oversimplifies the complex interplay between individual agency and societal constraints.

Feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser critiques the "displacement of social equality by the politics of recognition," arguing that focusing solely on individual agency overlooks the importance of addressing systemic inequalities (Fraser, 2003). Fraser writes, "Justice requires both recognition of cultural difference and redistribution of resources to address economic inequality" (Fraser, 2003). By acknowledging the limitations imposed by societal structures, the essay argues for a more nuanced understanding of autonomy that incorporates both individual and collective dimensions.

Moreover, the concept of "situated freedom" developed by feminist philosopher María Lugones emphasizes the importance of context in shaping autonomy. Lugones argues, "Freedom is always situated within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape the possibilities for action" (Lugones, 2003). This perspective highlights the need to consider the broader societal structures that influence individual autonomy.

Another possible counterargument is that autonomy is inherently an individualistic concept and that efforts to integrate social context and interdependence undermine its core principles. Critics argue that autonomy should focus on individual freedom and self-determination, independent of social influences.

In response, feminist philosophers have developed the concept of relational autonomy, which recognizes the importance of relationships and social context in shaping individual freedom. Relational autonomy emphasizes that individuals are embedded in social networks and that their choices and actions are influenced by these connections. By incorporating relational aspects, this approach provides a more realistic and inclusive understanding of autonomy that accounts for the complexities of human life (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000).

In concluding, the essay synthesizes the discussions to affirm that understanding existential autonomy in isolation from societal influences, particularly gender, is incomplete. It advocates for a holistic approach that integrates existential and feminist philosophies with cross-cultural

insights to offer a more comprehensive understanding of autonomy—one that recognizes the constraints imposed by gender and suggests ways to redefine autonomy inclusively. By considering the diverse ways in which autonomy is understood and experienced across cultures and genders, we can better appreciate the complexities of human freedom and the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

Continued dialogue and collaboration between existentialist and feminist scholars are essential to addressing the evolving challenges related to autonomy and gender. By incorporating insights from diverse cultural perspectives, we can develop more effective strategies for promoting gender equality and individual freedom in a globalized world. This holistic approach not only enriches our understanding of autonomy but also provides a framework for creating more inclusive and equitable societies.

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