

# How should we understand the loss of freedom that occurs when people internalise oppressive norms?

In this essay I argue that a positive theory of freedom can account for losses in freedom following the internalisation of oppressive norms. Specifically, I pit Paul Benson's normatively substantive theory of autonomy against John Christman's procedural approach, expounding other contemporary accounts along the way. I conclude that a normatively substantive theory of autonomy is the most cogent: it can explain how an autonomous agent is able to provide substantive reasons for holding authentic motivations with respect to their 'agent proper'. I acknowledge that this is not always a clear-cut task.

## 1. Oppression

Oppression occurs when people are unjustly controlled such that they are restrained. An oppressive authority might, for instance, indoctrinate people. But this is an extreme case; not all cases are superlative. More commonly, oppression is less assertive and more pernicious. Such is the case when people are gradually or subtly manipulated—for example, through relentless product advertising and the normalisation of high beauty standards.

In the positive view *internalisation* of oppressive norms—say, belonging to a community, society, culture, or manipulative person—occurs when an agent adopts motivations born outside of self-governance, falsely interpreting them as their own. This disposes them to acting in ways favourable to the oppressor.

Take the propaganda of a fictional totalitarian state. The state's officials instil into its citizens the belief that their leader is 'divine' to stir up a 'necessary' war which will inflict pain and suffering onto its citizens for a 'greater good'. This is despite the fact their leader is a belligerent psychopath of below-average intelligence who only seeks to maximise their own reputation and is unconcerned with the wellbeing of the populace. The state's propaganda, therefore, oppresses its citizens into internalising a belief they would not ordinarily believe. Similarly, a susceptible consumer of an online music platform might sincerely claim to like certain songs; however, these songs were drilled into their head by the automated playlists of the platform's sophisticated algorithms. Arguably, then, the consumer was unjustly controlled into making preferences favourable to the platform and/or artists. In both cases a successful theory of freedom will clearly demonstrate how losses in freedom occurred with respect to 'autonomy' or 'liberty' or some other function of freedom.

I will now briefly walk through two views of freedom which are pertinent to my support for a version of positive autonomy later.

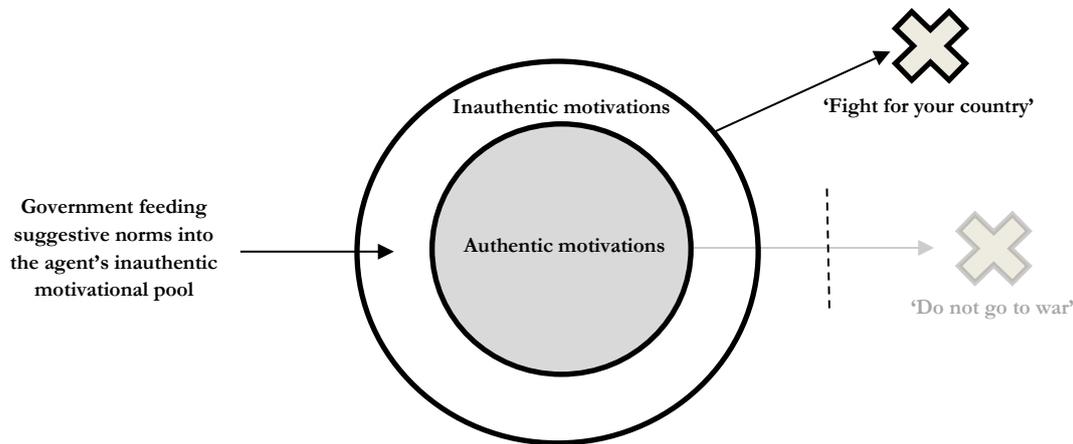
Immanuel Kant (1998), through the 'Categorical Imperative', put forward a case for freedom which frees us from our environmentally influenceable inclinations. In his view we can abstract away from heteronomy by producing universal moral laws, reached via the transcendental authority of rationality. This supposedly occurs in the noumenal realm of rational representation. Arguably, however, it is implausible that we can seamlessly break away from personal values (predispositions, attitudes, emotions, etc.). So *pure* reasoning power might not be possible. Furthermore, Kant's theory of autonomy might be an empty legalism because it leads to infinite regress of 'rational justification' to recursively explain how inclinations are lifted from us.

Hegel wanted to collapse this cycle (Patten 2002). He reintroduced *content* to the notion of freedom (i.e. the stuff we cannot possibly abstract from), arguing it is possible to achieve autonomy with respect to it. The self-governing agent has to will their freedom. They are then free—on subjective grounds if they understand their true self; and on objective grounds if their freedoms are protected and promoted across various institutions. In Hegel's view we obtain a precursor to a coherent idea of freedom through an agent who calls into question the content of potentially oppressive norms.

## 2. Self-identification

In this section my strategy is to introduce ‘self-identification’—a notion which will be essential to my defence of a normatively substantive theory of autonomy in section 3 since it reveals the authenticity of an agent’s motivations.

An agent can be said to be operating autonomously with respect to their motivations in virtue of being able to delineate and respond to their ‘agent proper’ (true self), which requires identifying authentic motivations. Operating with respect to inauthentic motivations, on the other hand, equates to losses in freedom (Fig. 1) since the agent behaves within the limits of norms they have internalised.



**Fig. 1:** Preference-manipulation of an agent as depicted in the positive view. Their agent proper’s authentic motivation not to go to war is relegated by the internalised motivation to fight for their country, which is achieved through governmental influence over their decision-making. The depiction contrasts with negative conceptions of freedom<sup>1</sup> (dashed line).

Self-identification, therefore, plays a key role in autonomy. An emotionally abused husband who does not stand up to his wife and financially indebts himself for her might seem externally free from his words; however, his internal dispositions reveal that his values did not originate internally but evolved through his exposure to archetypal gender roles and the norms of masculinity, which are shared by his closer friends and wider communities. He only *superficially* identifies with these. Unbeknownst to him, these inauthentic motivations, metaphorically speaking, sit on the surface of agent-proper-hood and are not self-identified. Therefore, his autonomy has been *constrained*.

The difficulty, as we will see, lies in reliably identifying inauthentic motivations to label them ‘unjust’.

## 3. A normatively substantive account

Normatively substantive accounts of autonomy adhere to traditional versions of ‘positive freedom’, in line with Hegel’s position, for they associate freedom with certain kinds of content. An agent can regain or protect themselves from losses in freedom if they can identify their agent proper by analytically discerning the content of their motivations. For this position to stick, however, we need content to be self-evidently oppressive, which I recognise is not always possible.

Exactly what do I mean by ‘content’? Paul Benson (1991), a subscriber to normatively substantive theory, provides an argument for self-regulation, whereby an agent, with rational competence, can enact

<sup>1</sup>Proponents of negative theories, which are dialectally opposite to positive theories, attempt to explain internalised oppression through the existence of *external* impediments. In this case the government might have removed legal pathways usually open to the agent to make it more difficult to decline requests to fight.

practical judgements about their motivations from their content. If they deem the motivations to stem from inside the locus of their minds, because they identify *substantive reasons* for holding them, and outside the sphere of controlling oppressive forces, they act autonomously with respect to their agent-proper-selves. Take my love for philosophy: the content of my desire is expressed in ‘love for philosophy’, which, demonstrably, is non-oppressive.

Benson, however, claims that autonomy is undermined when more-insidious forces are at play—forces which are undetectable due to our limited reasoning powers as imperfect creatures, meaning some information is not processed ‘normally’. This is the process of ‘socialisation’: gradually or subtly learning what behaviours are communally ‘acceptable’. For example, a woman learns to understand her self-worth from the reactions of others<sup>2</sup>, who are internalising these standards too, where the price of nonconformity to contrived notions of femininity is social sanctioning. She does not view her desire to enhance her beauty as the implicit function of a male-dominated society: she identifies with a view which is more in line with how she wants to be understood: ‘I do this for me’. Yet her self-profession fails to recognise the pressures of socialisation which have caused her to slowly internalise oppressive norms.

However, Benson’s deployment of ‘control’ reformulates simple ‘critical reflection’ to show how autonomous agents *can* be identified in the face of a ‘good deal’ of socialisation. How? By self-regulating their motivations they can grasp their substantive reasons. I am autonomous with respect to my passion for philosophy because I can rationalise why it suits *me* in *my* terms. When an agent

*‘acts autonomously [they] can put into effect practical judgements about the course of action [they] rationally ought to perform... [I]f I can act because I accept these reasons as adequate grounds for acting, then the reasons must also be capable of figuring in the explanation of my action.’* (Benson 1991, p. 402)

As such, Benson’s theory claims to hold predictive value when an agent is autonomous, potentially quashing the kind of scepticism that comes with other approaches. However, we still need to be convinced that the agent can *know*, in depth, what is special about the content of their reasons. I explore this issue alongside ways to tackle it in section 4 as one of two major challenges.

#### 4. A challenge to Benson: How discernible is oppressive content?

**H**ow do we identify motivations that have resulted from internalised oppression based on content which is not so self-evident? Even if we are critically rational and unaffected by oppressive socialisation, will we recognise substantive reasons as even remotely human when we plough downwards in reflection or will we find a labyrinth of buried indecipherable, inconsistent desire sets? I argue his theory *can* stand, so long as we add some conditions to it.

The functions of oppressive and non-oppressive socialisation can be one and the same in how they shape critical reflection. However, we can keep the notion of autonomous agents intact by highlighting the role of self-esteem (or self-worth) in skewing critical reflection, whereby content which reflects devaluation of one’s self is a sign of non-autonomy (Charles 2010). In self-esteem, therefore, we have a tool to complement Benson’s theory.

Benson’s theory is further augmented by the views of Natalie Stoljar (2000), another normatively substantive theorist. Benson espouses ‘stronger’ and ‘weaker’ theories of normative competence: she says the stronger attaches autonomy in pursuing self-esteem to ‘an ability to criticize actions competently by relevant normative standards’; the weaker offers a condition of autonomy based on an agent’s trust in their reasoning powers. In the weaker view, a woman surrenders her autonomy when she grants normative

<sup>2</sup>Benson focuses on the idea that women fear men’s reactions. I think this ignores the fact that women in his example may well worry about what other women think too.

competence to others but not herself—e.g. by not having sex outside of wedlock based on the judgements of others. This, however, fails because an agent can be competent in her decision-making and strong-sensed enough to perform self-esteem-boosting actions but misguided in locating *her* motivations. Not wanting to have sex out of wedlock diminishes her sexual agency, sure, but she still sufficiently trusts her worthiness to hold this position: she still finds a way to ostensibly increase her social standing and, perhaps, her autonomy within her community.

Conversely, her autonomy *is* undermined if she internalises a norm which does not belong to her own self-identified, *normative standards*, in accordance with a stronger competence theory. Consider a woman who believes she must have a house, a husband (and his name), and a child before her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday: the source of her substantive reasons can be deciphered by the content of her values. She should not be considered autonomous if she has internalised oppressive norms which, for example, cause her to see these things as ‘expression[s] of “real” womanhood’ to other people; but she *is* autonomous if they reflect her authentically self-determined substantive reasons—shelter, financial security, love, and so forth—because she genuinely wants them upon sufficient rational reflection. She determines her own adequacy (self-esteem) by understanding her reasons, which are not externally dictated.

A woman—or, indeed, any agent—does not always choose which content surrounds *her*, nor does she always behave independently, but her self-regulation means her self-identified motivations can be held up as authentic. Diana Meyers (2000) calls this the ‘skill of self-discovery’. However, Meyers’ claim that women can exercise autonomy with respect to female genital mutilation (FGM) seems to expose something absurd about my position so far: that women may come up with all kinds of rational, potentially substantive reasons for undergoing it—e.g. to show courage usually only reserved for masculinity, to complete a test of endurance prior to labour pains, to demonstrate morally appropriate fertility. Can we really say any of these motivations are inauthentic? Often little sticks out to say autonomy was taken away, even at a young age.

Compare FGM to elective amputation. While a strong desire to have a healthy limb amputated is treated as a disorder (Blom *et al.* 2016), we can conceive that people rationalise substantive reasons for it. Debatably, it is an absurd thing to do—but where is the oppression? Why is FGM oppressive but this not? They both form part of a person’s identity (much like my love of philosophy and my nan’s love of diamonds). Who are we to say their motivations were inauthentically formed through the causal orders of oppression? This tells us that oppression is not necessarily ingrained in the content of a particular culture *per se*; rather, that it can occur in virtue of the very fact that norms *surround us*. In the absence of a theory which is efficacious at accounting for processes like subversion and manipulation, perhaps we ought to remain sceptical for cases like FGM. Alternatively, FGM is not oppressive.

Nevertheless, I argue that, if we stick to a stronger version of normative competence, we can usually adopt a content-based approach to discern *most* inauthentic motivations to highlight losses in freedom—or, at least, guess autonomy’s extent.

## 5. Does a procedural account fare any better?

I will now look at the four-step procedural account of John Christman (1991) to see whether it can usurp Benson’s content-based approach. With Christman’s *a priori* set of rules we can question how our motivations are formed. His approach is content-neutral and quite aside from self-identification. It, therefore, might circumvent some of the problems we have encountered so far. However, I claim that it faces bigger problems.

In ‘clear-headed’ fashion and with no constraints on the act of self-reflection, Christman states that a person can be autonomous relative to a desire (or belief) if: (i) they reflect on its formation; (ii) they did

not resist its development; (iii) their lack of resistance was not due to the inhibition of self-reflection; and (iv) their judgements and subsequent desire sets are rational.

Christman hopes to demonstrate how an agent can bring forward a desire consciously to expose it to scrutiny and concentrate on how it arrived there. For example, I hold a strong rational desire to drink milk. Critically reflecting on this desire, whose entry I did not resist, I rationally conclude that it developed because of heavy advertisement and misinformation. I internalised an oppressive norm.

What about trickier cases—was I oppressed into liking football by my father? When I reflect on it rationally I can see that I did not resist the encouragement nor did my father inhibit my powers of self-reflection (I was initially young and impressionable). The procedure points to some kind of control over me. Perhaps it was manipulative and autonomy-impairing; perhaps it was not unjust enough to be considered oppressive.<sup>3</sup>

Procedural approaches seem to circumvent a famous accusation levelled at normatively substantive accounts: that such theories can inadvertently license totalitarianism (Berlin 1969), where it may be 'legitimate' to unjustly intervene in people's lives if they are deemed to be acting non-autonomously—say, because the government wants to promote autonomy. However, I do not see this as a spanner in the works of normatively substantive theories of autonomy: I see this is an evaluative question of freedom.<sup>4</sup>

## 6. Why the challenges are too much for Christman

Christman's account flounders in two particular respects. Firstly, it falls short of its goal—namely, truly understanding the generation of a desire—on account of presupposing too much control over our cognitive faculties. Are we capable enough for his procedure? Secondly, whilst Christman does better at explaining what he expects from rationality in helping us act freely, he does not convince us it is a coherent tool.

First, as Benson contested, falsely assuming we are autonomous with respect to our motivations can lead us into a state of mind which overly trusts its ability to self-reflect, whereby the agent is unable to detect subversion and is deceived into thinking steps (i) to (iv) can be met. This is especially true if the ideas transfer into their motivational pools gradually or subtly, for they cannot control socialisation's autonomy-impairing influence, rendering them susceptible to unwilfully internalising oppressive norms

Citing feminine gender socialisation, through which a woman accepts as her own that she must 'fix herself up' in accordance with the beauty standards around her (e.g. with respect to friends, social media, and various industries, like music and fashion, which profit from objectifying women), Benson shows how procedural theories are derailed by scepticism when an agent does not have the capacity to critically reflect on motivations to determine their authenticity. Even with a sharp mind, her autonomy is liable to being subverted, leaving her none the wiser to oppressive forces as she is *procedurally* blinded to the norms which enter her sense of self to inorganically motivate her to enhance her 'beauty'.

Christman's procedural approach, then, falters by failing to figure out *how* certain content emerges. By remaining content-neutral, Christman's theory suffers from an inability to account for values which survive introspection to inhibit critical reflection (Charles 2010). In not picking apart the content of potentially oppressive norms, he is left shooting in the dark at many desire-formations which cannot be analysed in consciously accessible ways. While socialisation unavoidably oppresses agents in both theories, Benson avoids issues with an agent's inability to track ideas which burrow into their motivational pools

<sup>3</sup>In fact, as long as we have no attitudes towards how desires arrive, Christmas is happy to say these are not cases of internalised oppression.

<sup>4</sup>A government might want to increase taxes to reduce public consumption of sugary drinks. So, having exhausted all other strategies, it seeks to oppressively control spending patterns. But the government's illiberal intervention is only designed to reduce the detrimental *effect* of autonomy (e.g. to tackle a public-health crisis). This is quite a separate task from constructing an idea of it.

from the outside because, in his view, the agent can self-regulate and determine what motivations are theirs from the inside.

Second, Christman fails to demonstrate that rational thinking is collapsible to a single, unified agent. His procedure hinges on *minimal* rationality only, whereby the agent needs to act consistently with their beliefs or transitively on the basis of their contingent desires. He provides great detail on the modes of rationality that can be employed, supporting its internal as opposed to external conditions. He presupposes rationality as possibly transcendently separate from contingent desires and singles out *manifest* inconsistencies (desires that manifest consciously) as threats to autonomy:

‘[T]he self-reflection that autonomy necessitates must not involve manifest inconsistencies which bring into question the unity of the self...[W]hat is required [for this] is (only) minimal, internalist rationality.’ (Christman 1991, p. 351)

At face value this delineates an agent who can think with sufficient clarity to spot oppressive norms. However, even Christman admits that this is ambitious, requiring ‘some principle of charity’.

Compounding the ‘logical implications’ of his conditions (which entail consistency as only *theoretically* implausible), I claim he faces a practical problem too. That is, we are not ‘clear-headed’ creatures since we are frequently too divided by multiple *rationality* born beliefs to exhibit unity of self. As such, our ability to become acutely aware of changes and development in our characters rationally is routinely obfuscated and we cannot procedurally free ourselves in a unified way, minimally or manifestly, from potentially oppressive norms with any significant degree of confidence.

Consider the following example. I attend to a strong, rationally born belief in not breastfeeding my child in public, as a cultural norm of my community; it does not follow that I do not have a belief whatsoever in breastfeeding in public. I believe in both positions (and in positions between), just to different degrees. I am rarely, if ever, spared of conflicting inconsistencies because, like all agents, I usually hold a myriad of competing beliefs which I can arrive at rationally. In practice, I assess my beliefs side by side and assign relative weights to them such that they are not independently conceived. Furthermore, I leave parts of my decision-making to an element of chance: one belief will eventually manifest as the one I appear to rationally single out.

Christman’s theory, then, rests too much on rationality being an autonomy-granting idealism, similarly to Kant. So not only does Christmas fail to account for subversion and other constraints on critical reflection, it is ambitious in demarcating a unified agent.

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Nonetheless, hope persists in normatively substantive theory, whose version of ‘autonomy’ depends on reasons for holding motivations, not procedure, and is not forced to remain sceptical while being comfortable with inconsistencies, so long as they pertain to a self-governing agent.

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