

Workshop:
Rethinking Autonomy
Abstracts

Deborah Brown (UQ): Individualism and Autonomy in Descartes

Descartes is generally perceived as the arch individualist and defender of unbridled autonomy, at least the “autonomy of the mental”. This oversimplified reading is complicated by his account of love and our propensity to form larger unions or selves, of which we may be only the lesser part, and by the account of love as involving essentially an act of will. In Descartes’ treatment of the will the supposed dichotomy between reason and passion is therefore less clear cut, a fact that has ramifications for how we understand autonomy within the Cartesian framework.

Ariane Schneck (Hamburg/Humboldt): Autonomy and (Self-)Love in Descartes

That Descartes conceives of mind and body as fundamentally different substances – one thinking and immaterial, the other one extended and material – famously poses the problem of how these two substances interact. However, it also poses a second, less appreciated problem: how they are united in one single thing, namely the human being. In my talk, I consider this second problem from a new angle. I argue that Descartes is concerned not only with the metaphysical question of how mind and body are united but also with phenomenological and moral questions: (1) how the soul can feel like it is united with its body and (2) how it can relate to its body as truly belonging to itself despite its being a substance distinct from the body. In so doing, I argue that the soul’s rational control of bodily passions, if successful, grounds a special kind of affective, loving union between mind and body that is based on love’s property of establishing a union between the thing loving and the thing loved.

Lisa Shapiro (Simon Fraser): Two Senses of Belonging: Descartes on Thinking

In the Second Meditation, Descartes asserts that what properly belongs to him is thinking, and so concludes he is a thinking thing. One sense of ‘belong’ in play here is clearly the metaphysical one. Thinking, as the principal attribute of thinking substance, belongs to the substance, and particular acts of thinking also belong to the substance as modes. A focus on this metaphysical belonging distracts from another sense in which Descartes thought to belong a thinking thing, that in which we take ownership of our thoughts. It is tempting to call this a phenomenological belonging, but this ownership goes beyond the awareness proper to thought, to something more like an assertion of authority.

Catriona Mackenzie (Macquarie): Wollstonecraft on Autonomy and Equality

Moira Gatens (Sydney): *Spinoza’s free citizen meets Wollstonecraft’s feminist Republicanism, Or, Freedom from Bondage through the transformation of affect (for men too!)*

Feminist scholarship has been critical of Kantian approaches to autonomy and has stressed instead a relational ethics and an affectively embodied account of socio-political life. Spinoza's philosophy has been a valuable resource for articulating relational autonomy but disappointing, to put it mildly, when it comes to thinking about women and citizenship. My presentation will offer an account of Spinoza's free man as exemplifying the affective as well as rational capacities needed for autonomous self-realization. But his account of citizenship includes a sad flaw, namely, his inability to recognize women as co-entitled to political freedom and equality. I relate this limitation to Spinoza's failure to realize the true scope of a virtue that he values highly, *fortitudo* (strength of mind). *Fortitudo* has a double aspect: it embodies the virtue of self-care (*animositas*) and the correlative virtue of care for others (*generositas*). Wollstonecraft understood the co-constitution of self and other and the role such understanding plays in the attainment of genuine autonomy. Her vision of an inclusive commonweal stands as a corrective to Spinoza's error. Combined, their respective Republican views tell a rich story about individuals, affect, autonomy, and the various practices that institutions can deploy to constrain or enable the flourishing of important Republican virtues, such as *fortitudo*.

Peter Anstey (Sydney): Political Liberty and the Separation of Powers

This paper charts the manner in which the theory of principles was applied in order to secure the political liberty of the individual in the thought of Montesquieu and the founding fathers of the American Constitution. It is well known that the popular solution to the problem of liberty, namely, the Separation of Powers, was adumbrated in Aristotle's *Politics*. This paper takes the Aristotelian influence a step further by arguing that the early moderns framed the problem of political liberty and the theory of the Separation of Powers in terms of the theory of knowledge acquisition that is set out in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. There is a very real sense then, in which The Constitution of the United States of America is an Aristotelian legacy.

Jacqueline Broad (Monash): Agency and Autonomy in Women's Devotional Writings of the Early Modern Period

Some scholars have identified a seeming paradox at the heart of early modern feminism. On the one hand, it appears that some early modern feminists, such as the High-Church Anglican Mary Astell (1666-1731), strongly urge their fellow women to preserve their independence of judgement from men; yet, on the other, they insist upon those same women maintaining a submissive deference to the established church. Scholars have asked: how can Astell and her fellow Anglican defenders of women espouse complete submission to the teachings of the Church of England, while at the same time urging women to maintain their autonomy in judging what is best? One proposed solution is to accept that while Astell's ideas about 'liberating women's minds' might *seem* to be radical, they are in fact rather orthodox contributions to the Anglican reformation of manners movement of her time; she does not strictly advocate a feminist theory of autonomy at all. In this paper, I put forward a different solution. I suggest that a close examination of the concept of agency in Anglican women's devotional texts of the period, and of the role this concept plays in Astell's feminist arguments, can help to dispel the paradox. In the first part of the paper, I maintain that through their emphasis on habitual self-examination and long-term self-improvement, the Anglican devotional texts promote a diachronic conception of the self: a

view of a woman's whole self as a free and rational being capable of projecting itself into the future and capable of acquiring the self-control necessary to attain future-oriented goals, such as divine forgiveness and eternal salvation. In the second part, I maintain that these highly influential ideas about female selfhood and self-government re-emerge as core premises in Astell's feminist arguments. I then conclude that the devotional ideal of female agency enables Astell to avoid the seeming paradox of suggesting that women might be fully autonomous yet live their lives in subjection to church doctrine.

Anik Waldow (Sydney): What is Humean Autonomy?

In this paper, I will investigate the extent to which the capacity to act in a self-determined way depends on well-functioning, low-level affective capacities. I will be particularly concerned with the link between our ability to empathise with the feelings and thoughts of others and the possibility to act in accordance with one's reflective judgements. To draw out this connection, the paper discusses Hume's account of sympathy and his conception of reflection as a capacity that grows out of our sensory and affective responsiveness to others. The central claim of the paper is that a Humean account of autonomy recognises that engaging with the feelings and thoughts of others forms an essential part of adopting the kind of reflective stance without which self-determined actions can hardly be achieved.

Stephen Gaukroger (Sydney): From Reason to Sensibility to Rationality

In the modern era, the idea of reason as the highest and distinctively human faculty becomes transformed into 'rationality', a set of impersonal, potentially algorithmic devices that enable optimal decision-making through a form of mechanized reasoning that bypasses judgement. I look at the abandonment of reason in favour of rationality in the modern era in four stages: (1) The rejection of a rationalist ethics, in writers like Rousseau, Hume, and Smith, in favour of sensibility. (2) The extensive attempts to naturalize sensibility, in medical writers and in Herder for example. That sensibility was naturalizable—made amenable to empirical enquiry—whereas reason wasn't, was seen as the great advantage of sensibility. (3) The naturalization of reason in Bentham and the utilitarians. Here I want to argue that what actually happened was not the naturalization of reason of such, but the substitution of something quantifiable for reason: namely rationality. (4) Finally, I explore rationality and its measurable manifestation, 'intelligence'.