

# *Relational Autonomy*

Bioethics: Autonomy and Health (Fall 2012)

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# *Some Test Cases...*

- Jane, 18, grew up surrounded by images of slender and busty women. Her dolls, magazines, and television shows all push unattainable beauty ideals. She believes that no one will appreciate or value a woman who does not have this body type. She now feels horrible about her body and can hardly stand to look in the mirror. She thinks she can start respecting herself if she gets plastic surgery.
- Can Jane autonomously choose breast augmentation surgery?

# *Some Test Cases...*

- Jake, 27, had a happy childhood and received a first-rate education. He has just finished his first tour in Iraq. He watched an explosive kill his closest friend, but he has not told his family about the loss. He feels emotionally numb, and he avoids reflecting on what he experienced. Being with his wife and children does not bring him much pleasure, and he keeps thinking about volunteering for another tour.
- Can Jake autonomously choose to return to combat?

# *Relational Autonomy as a Concept*

- “conviction that persons are socially embedded and that agents’ identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity” (4)
- Rejection of
  - Defining ‘autonomy’ in a way that excludes groups of people (such as women and minorities)
  - Unrealistic, unjustified, and over-idealized notions of what capacities are needed to reason, plan, and make authentic and free decisions

# *Traditional Accounts of Autonomy: Problematic Claims*

- Humans are capable of being self-sufficient, isolatable, and independent beings.
- We are atomistic and radically separate from other persons
  - in development, self-understanding, or constitution.
- It is undesirable to be a person who is dependent on others and who lacks complete self-control.
- Every person is capable of successful self-mastery, since all of our beliefs, desires, and emotions are clear and transparent to us.
- Our identities as individuals are clear and unified, and our relationships and associations with larger groups do not affect our identities in any deep way.



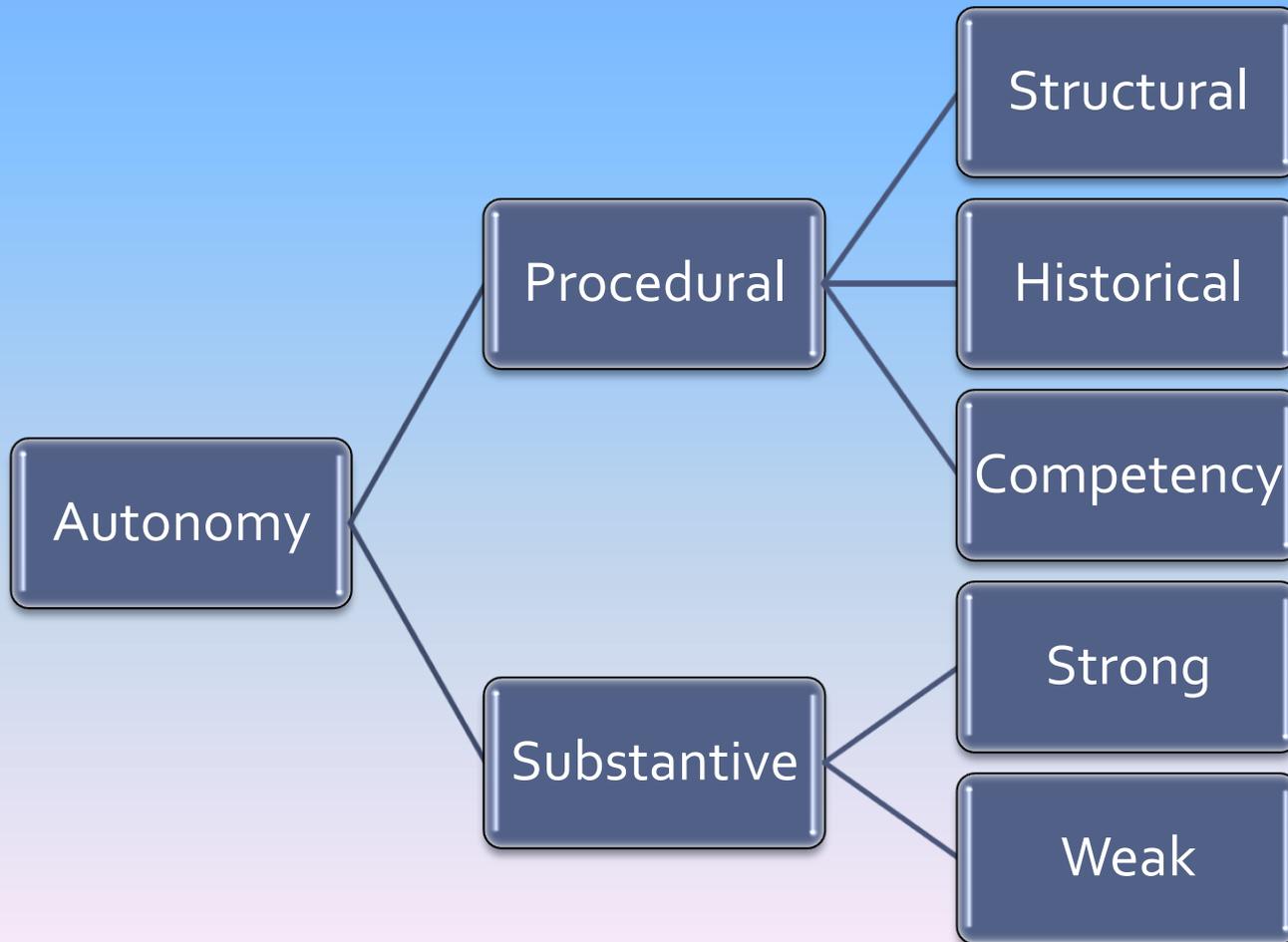
These claims can be  
problematic even if  
you are not a  
feminist!



# *What are we REALLY like as agents?*

- Communities and relationships help us develop, maintain, and further our autonomous capacities.
- No one is completely independent; we are deeply dependent and interpersonal creatures.
- Our sense of self and (perhaps) our identity are necessarily constituted (to a large extent) by how we interact with others and how we perceive ourselves in relation to others.
- Reason is not an isolated capacity that is immune to how we are socially situated, and it is not threatened by emotions or affiliative bonds.

# *Moving Forward: Conceptions of Autonomy*



# *Procedural vs. Substantive Accounts*

- **Procedural**

- “What matters for autonomy is whether the agent has subjected her motivations and actions to the appropriate kind of critical reflection” (13-14)
- Does the person have the capacities and skills to reflect critically?

- **Substantive**

- Critical reflection, no matter how thorough or sophisticated, is not sufficient to grant autonomy
- The *content* of emotions, desires, maxims, and values matters for assessing autonomous decision-making.

“think of autonomy as a characteristic of agents who are emotional, embodied, desiring, creative, and feeling, as well as rational creatures” (21)

# *Discussion Questions*

- Relational autonomy accounts stand in opposition to traditional Kantian accounts that rely on Reason alone for agency. Do you find the relational critiques compelling?
- Do procedural or substantive conceptions pinpoint what's really important for assessing autonomous decision-making?
- How should we understand autonomy in oppressive contexts, where someone has been indoctrinated with oppressive norms?



*Questions? Comments?*