

Moral autonomy after Kant: a continental reassessment from Hegel to Foucault

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Article

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Abstract

This article analyzes the moral autonomy controversy in the Continental tradition and asserts that Kant's concept of autonomy as universal self-legislation should be reinterpreted in light of Hegel's and Foucault's critiques. Kant bases moral normativity on the power of the will to give itself a universal law. Hegel problematizes this by asserting that "concrete social institutions" and recognition within "ethical life" are necessary for real freedom, that autonomy must be historicized and mediatized (Pippin, 1989; Pinkard, 2007). Foucault in turn dismantles the Kantian subject via genealogy: subjects and norms are historically situated constructs of power-knowledge regimes. But Foucault too gestures towards an agency, by way of critical self-formation and parrhesia (truth-telling) as a way of life (Foucault, 1997, p. vii; Allen, 2003). Therefore advance the concept of "historically situated critical agency": a form of autonomy that still carries normativity in its wake but is fully aware of its situatedness in history, in institution, and in discourse. This view retains the idea of autonomy (i.e., self-governance, critical freedom) without recourse to transcendental foundations and insofar as Hegelian immanent critique and Foucauldian genealogy are understood to be complementary. In contrast to presently available neo-Kantian constructivist (Korsgaard, 1996) or recognition-theoretic (Honneth, 1995) formulations, the framework introduced here situates genealogical critique as a constitutive rather than a marginal aspect of normative self-legislation. Consequences for contemporary ethics and subjectivity are considered, including a suggestion that what it is to be a moral agent in the present is to be one who critically interrogates and seeks to alter the social conditions that produce us.

Introduction: autonomy as an interdisciplinary problem

The question of moral autonomy is not confined to the history of philosophy. Contemporary social life confronts individuals with dense and often opaque institutional structures (states, markets, and digital platforms) that shape how people reason, choose, and understand themselves, even as those same institutions depend on citizens who can be held responsible for their choices (Honneth, 2008; Vaccarino Bremner, 2020). Debates over human rights, bioethics, and democratic citizenship all presuppose some workable notion of self-governing agency, yet none of them can rest content with a purely formal, ahistorical picture of the rational will, nor with an account so deflationary that it leaves no room for normative accountability. This paper approaches autonomy as a problem for social and behavioural science as much as for philosophy: it revisits the history of the concept from Kant through Hegel to Foucault in order to clarify a category that political theory, sociology, and practical ethics continue to invoke without adequate grounding. By proposing a synthesis, historically situated critical agency, the paper aims to supply a more defensible account of what it means to say that an agent, an institution, or a society is self-governing, one that can inform how policy, education, and public discourse address individuals as both products and authors of their social conditions.

Kantian autonomy

In Kantian ethics, autonomy is the ability of a rational agent to issue the moral law to itself rather than obey external commands (Christman, 2003). For Kant, moral authority is not derived from God, society or inclinations, but it is the free will that legislates the morality. Kant is well-known for the statement, “we autonomously dictate to ourselves the moral law” (Kant, 1785). For practical purposes this means that a moral agent acts only on those maxims that she can rationally will to be made universal laws (i.e., the categorical imperative). The rational will therefore commits itself to the moral law, in so far as, according to Kant with Christman (2003), it regards the requirements of the moral law as self-imposed and unconditional. This self-legislation, one might say, is the very essence of our dignity, and nobody can alienate him- or herself from it; we must never use other people (or ourselves) as mere means to an end but always treat them (and ourselves) as ends. Crucially, Kant’s treatment is both transcendental and formal: what makes a maxim correct depends on the form of the maxim (its “universality”), not anything about the content of the maxim. Freedom is for Kant founded in a “transcendental freedom,” the notion that we are detached from deterministic forces and that we can be the source of our own choices (Kant, 1785).

Kant’s model yields a universal normativity: because the rational structure of freedom is the same for all agents, the moral law is binding for any rational will. In the Groundwork, Kant contrasts autonomy with heteronomy, insisting that true morality requires acting from a self-imposed law (autonomy) rather than external inclination or command (Kant, 1785). Thus, the “bindingness of the moral law is self-imposed” (Kant, 1785). Autonomy thereby entails impartiality: one must not “make an exception for oneself” when deliberating (one’s maxims must be consistent for all) (Kant, 1785). In sum, Kant gives a formal conception of autonomy: a rational will acting by the form of universal law, with freedom understood a priori rather than given.

This Kantian autonomy has been enormously influential. It does not, however, exclude the importance of material moral agency and respect for persons. Its proponents stress that autonomy inhibits paternalism and forms the foundation of rights-based liberalism. Still, Kant’s ideal does lead to well-known tensions. Detractors claim that it is too abstract, ahistorical, and individualistic. By positing the subject as capable of abstraction from all social particularities, Kant’s model of the subject seems to have overlooked the historical and institutional contexts that articulate our values and commitments (Pippin, 1989). Even so within Kant’s tradition, thinkers such as Rousseau had recognized the social nature of the *volonté générale*, and Kant himself in the Religion lectures suggests that the practical application of reason might consist in “having” the world in experience (Vaccarino Bremner, 2020). Nevertheless, the standard Kantian picture persists: the free moral subject as universal lawgiver, and the world of ‘practical reason’ as wholly independent of empirical contingencies.

Christine Korsgaard has provided one of the most elaborate accounts of the bindingness of the Kantian moral law, the law becoming binding through what she calls the “reflective endorsement” process: a rational agent on reflection regarding its own nature must commit to certain principles, and that agent’s practical identity is made up of those principles (1996). On this interpretation of constructivism, autonomy is not based on metaphysical freedom but on the formal requirements of practical reason

itself. Korsgaard (1996) thus re-interprets Kant as a modernizer who conceives of self-legislation as the very way in which we constitute ourselves as agents. This is a strong but contested claim, on the ground that the “reflective structure” Korsgaard outlines is still too thin, and is inadequate as an account of how historical and social conditions particularize our identities and our obligations (Honneth, 1995; Pippin, 1989). The paper to be presented claims that Hegel and Foucault, combined, enable us to answer this challenge in a manner that Korsgaard’s internal Kantian reconstruction cannot.

Some contemporary commentators note that Kant’s autonomy captures an essence of modern individualism. Christman (2003) notes that “moral autonomy, traditionally dated back to Kant, is the ability to think for oneself and to provide the moral law for oneself rather than simply following the commands of other people.” This formulation assumes that an agent’s rational will can, at least theoretically, separate itself from its historical context. On this point, debates in moral theory have focused on whether such a pristine autonomy can be sustained, or how it might be compatible with our factual entanglement in social and historical relations; feminist theorists, for example, have made a case for relational autonomy that accounts for social dependency (Christman, 2003). But in any event the Kantian model is the default: moral action is only justified if it is based on the agent’s own rational assent to principles that are sufficiently universal (Kant, 1785; Christman, 2003).

Hegelian mediation

Hegel is heir to Kant’s stress on autonomy and freedom, but he radically historicizes and socializes it. Kant conceived of freedom as a formal capacity of pure reason, whereas Hegel maintains that freedom is realized, not merely a formal moment of thought, within particular ethical life forms [Sittlichkeit]: the family, civil society, and the constitutional state. In Hegel’s system the very idea of a subject legislating in a vacuum would be absurd; rather the free will of all individuals is channeled through the intermediaries of social recognition and collective forms. With respect to Hegel’s own interpretation thereof, see Pippin (1989); Pinkard (2007) who, inter alia, argue that whereas Kant regarded freedom as an abstract universal capability belonging to all rational agents, Hegel portrayed it as already implicit in forms of social life. For Hegel, the norms do not emanate from a pure will but from the historical spirit of a people.

In Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 1807/1977), the path of consciousness reveals that an individual’s freedom and self-consciousness are achieved only in relation to other people and actual institutions. In Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, he contends that principles of abstract morality (such as Kant’s) are too general and detached from life: they must be expressed in material social forms. He calls this dynamic ethical substance, it seems, receiving content in the “determinate ethical substance” a community of life. By means of labor, language, and mutual recognition, people take part in objective spirit, the array of laws, norms, language, and morality, to which all are bound.

Hegel accused Kant of loftiness and abstraction in no uncertain terms. In earlier Jena writing on natural law, Hegel condemns both the empirical and the formalist: the effect of an empirical natural law is “contingent particulars,” and the “formal concept” (he is referring to Kant) is too unsubstantial and

abstract a medium through which to both connect human reason to experience (Hegel, 1821/1991). He notices, however, that Kant, Rousseau, and Fichte can none of them arrive at its solution because they remain in the abstract and do not relate universal moral will to particular social life (Hegel, 1821/1991). Genuine normativity can only occur when reason has gone flesh in historical reality, this is what Hegel means. This is what he is alluding to when he says, “The real is the rational and the rational the real”: the moral aims and the social order we live in are to be understood as moments of one historical whole.

So Hegel turns autonomy on its head. The individual will is not an arbitrary source of law, but an “embodiment of universal,” as Hegel would put it, only to the extent that it manifests within, and is disclosed by, concrete social relations. That is autonomy’s value, and that is what makes it a developmental autonomy. For example, Hegel’s well-known master–slave dialectic argues that the servant’s consciousness achieves self-consciousness and liberation through labor and recognition. In the same vein, Hegelian civil society is a process of individuals realizing their own particular needs and desires, but doing so within the confines of laws that harmonize individual freedom with the public good. For example, the right of the individual to property is acknowledged only through legal systems that balance interests. In each instance, freedom is a realized thought in material conditions rather than an innate capacity.

The neo-Hegelian interpretations of Pippin (1989) and Pinkard (2007) have been instrumental in reclaiming the normative power of this interpretation. Pippin situates this line of interpretation within an intellectual tradition that reads Hegel’s systematization of critical philosophy not as a rejection of Kant but as the post-Kantian completion, or realization, of the Kantian enterprise. In Pippin’s (1989) interpretation, Hegel’s *Phenomenology* demonstrates that the spontaneity of thought, Kant’s formal faculty of apperception, must be realized as a social and historical modality. In short, insofar as the content of what it is to be a rational self-legislator cannot be settled in the abstract, it must be understood as a participant in a community of mutual recognition. Freedom is not a given, but rather an attainment that requires “the correct sort of institutional scaffolding”: “freedom is not an external force or power, but it is always implicit within forms of social life” (p. 7, Pippin, 1989). Pinkard (2007) also reads the *Phenomenology* as an account of how (objective, transcendental) reason becomes realized through the endeavors of a (historically specific) social group, thereby showing that any appeal to a-temporal transcendental structure is self-serving and fails completely.

Axel Honneth (1995) has turned this Hegelian motif into a systematic philosophy of social life. In *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth maintains that individuals require mutual recognition in the spheres of love, rights, and social solidarity if they are to achieve agentic autonomy. Crucially, Honneth (1995) is not simply Hegel reinterpreted sociologically; he contends that the normative model of recognition-relations itself generates the standards for social critique. Those who are deprived of recognition, whether through contempt, violation of rights, or humiliation, endure a particular kind of moral wound that fuels emancipatory contestation. This suggests that the developmental model of autonomy has a self-critical aspect. Honneth (2008) further elaborates this analysis in *Reification*, asserting that instrumental attitudes - as when subjects treat themselves or others as mere things to be handled within certain

material, institutional routines - are in fact a forgetting of earlier, more primary forms of recognition, and that such a moral pathology, understood as a social pathology, is precisely what the Heideggerian social ontology of recognition should be able to disclose, diagnose, and overcome.

Along these lines, contemporary Hegel scholarship in general turns out to be both historicist and normative. Freedom, on this reading, is not a power external to or detached from forms of life (Pippin, 1989, p. 7). According to this line of thought, moral normativity without concrete instantiation is simply an empty form. Norms have to be vindicated partly by showing how they are realized in community practices. Concretely, this suggests Hegelian autonomy is conditioned by recognition: we are not self-conscious and thus not autonomous until we are recognized as free agents by others (Honneth, 1995).

From an adversarial perspective, one can note a tension in Hegel. On one hand, Hegel respects Kant's insight that freedom is bound to rationality (he famously writes the rational is real). On the other, he rejects the purely formal Kantian subject as naive. Critics of Hegel accuse him of justifying the status quo (as some interpreters alleged of Philosophy of Right), but defenders point out that Hegel's framework actually contains an "ought"-critique of given institutions (Obermayr, 2025). Hegel never dissolves the idea of autonomy; rather, he grounds it immanently. His concept of "immanent critique" suggests that norms are validated by showing how they emerge from the concrete contradictions of society.

In short, Hegel revises autonomy into a social account of freedom. The moral agent is not prior to history, but must realize her freedom through ethical relations. Autonomy survives this move, but only as an achievement, a freedom that is mediated by culture, institutions, and social recognition. It is no longer a solitude of the cogito but a communal self-understanding. Contemporary readings often emphasize that Hegel thereby preserves a normative standpoint (reason) while abandoning transcendental foundations. Hegel locates normativity in "the structure of thought itself" and in the intersubjective logic of justification.

Foucauldian critique and practices of the self

Michel Foucault's relation to autonomy is far more contradictory. He has extreme criticism for the notion of a singular transcendental subject, but he also never fully disavows the concept of critical freedom. Rather, he reduces autonomy to the task of historically informed critique and self-narration. To briefly outline the Foucauldian outlook: Foucault's genealogical approach demonstrates that what we consider to be universal truths, natural abilities (like the rational subject), are actually contingent results of power-knowledge assemblages. Consequently, the historical analysis raises questions about the very possibility of a self-legislating, universal actor.

In such texts as *The Order of Things* and *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault establishes that the categories of human sciences (madness, sickness, sexuality, criminality) are not eternally valid but vary between epochs. His famous inversion of Kant, rather than seeking the secret necessity behind the contingent, he interrogates the contingency beneath certain apparent necessary truths, comments on this (Foucault,

1997). For example, modern psychiatry treats “madness” as a medical condition, but Foucault shows that this is a historical construction reflecting specific moral and political interests, not a discovery of a metaphysical essence. In each case, a dominant episteme and disciplinary regime impose norms on subjects. In this sense Foucault breaks from Kant: he rejects the a priori subject of consciousness or reason, treating the “subject” as itself an effect of discourse and power.

For Kant, the subject is ground; for Foucault, it is consequence. Subjects are “inflicted” by power networks. People are born into discourses (medical, legal, educational) that classify and shape them. As Foucault (1997) notes, subjects are constituted by power/knowledge, though later they themselves partake in that construction and modify themselves through practices of the self. Early Foucault emphasizes that individuals do not pre-exist but emerge through historical processes (e.g. doctors, prisons, schools create the modern subject). He is often interpreted as undermining any notion of autonomy at all, since every action is pre-structured by power.

However, this account is only half the story. In his later writings (the “ethical turn”), Foucault reintroduces the notion of agency and even something like autonomy, though not in Kant’s sense. He studies “technologies of the self” (Greek and Roman practices of care) and the notion of parrhesia (free speech/truth-telling) to show how subjects can consciously shape themselves. Subjects are never fully determined: they can resist, reinterpret, and constitute themselves within constraints. In late texts, Foucault explicitly links his critique to the Enlightenment: rather than providing a rational justification of universal truths, he offers a “critical-historical ontology of ourselves,” uncovering the arbitrary rules we impose on ourselves so that we may choose otherwise (Foucault, 1997). In Foucault’s formulation, the goal is to determine “what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects” (Foucault, 1997, p. 315). Here autonomy is recast: it is not metaphysical freedom, but the capacity or power to transform oneself through revealing and interrogating the historical givens of one’s being.

Amy Allen (2003) offers a particularly significant reading, in Foucault and Enlightenment, demonstrating how Foucault’s self-styled “attitude of modernity” emerges as a non-Kantian yet truly normative version of critical agency. Allen argues that Foucault does not simply dismiss Kant but undertakes a genealogical displacement of the Kantian subject - what was assumed to be a transcendental structure is unmasked as an historically constituted form of subjectivity. Importantly, this displacement does not result in nihilism: by making visible the contingency of our self-understanding, Foucault also opens up the possibility, as Allen terms it, of “minimalist agency” - the potential to say no to and change the identities power inscribes on us (Allen, 2003, pp. 44–47). This small but real agency, and it is very small, is what this article attempts to elaborate upon in order to develop a model of historically situated critical agency.

Foucault even reclaims the term “autonomy” in this register. In his Berkeley lectures on parrhesia, he famously conjoins his project with the Kantian tradition, calling it a genealogy of the critical attitude. Foucault likens parrhesia (courageous truth-telling) to Kantian critique: both involve subjecting imposed

truths to interrogation. He writes that his aim is to show “what is not or no longer indispensable for...ourselves as autonomous subjects” (Foucault, 1997, p. 315). Thus, contrary to a simplistic reading, Foucault does not deny the possibility of autonomy outright; he problematizes the naive notion of a self-grounded subject. Instead, he suggests that autonomy should be the outcome of an active critical relationship to history.

Foucault describes how ancient practices allowed one to shape one’s desires and character by disciplines of conduct. Today, by analogy, autonomy involves engaging in practices of freedom: refusing certain power-imposed ways of being, creatively constructing new self-relations, and telling truth to power. As Foucault (1997) observes, “subjects are not simply constructed by power; they themselves partake in that construction and modify themselves through practices of the self.” Individuals can actively “refuse, adopt and alter forms of being a subject.” In short, Foucauldian autonomy is pragmatic: one has discretion in self-shaping, but this discretion always starts from a particular social world (Vaccarino Bremner, 2020).

Vaccarino Bremner (2020) characterizes this result as the “pragmatic subject”: one who has a degree of discretion in how to fashion herself, yet “must always begin from a determinate, socially specific starting point” (p. 342). In Kant’s terms, this pragmatic subject is the *Weltbürger*, an inhabitant of the world rather than a being above it (Vaccarino Bremner, 2020, p. 342). The autonomy exercised is thus creative but socially shaped. It is more “practical” than Kantian formalism. In Foucault’s own words (citing Kant), enlightenment means using one’s own reason in a historically conditioned way. We are “residing in the world” as constituted, but we can still question it. Autonomy becomes the courage to tell truth and transform oneself within context.

Importantly, Foucault insists that this critical autonomy still has moral dimensions, even if he calls it an ethics of truth. He argues that binding ourselves to the pursuit of truth can be seen as a form of self-legislation (an alternative to Kant’s moral law): “autonomy consists in binding oneself to the law by freely conforming one’s conduct to it.” For Kant, it was the moral law, but for Foucault, the law can be the truth or knowledge one risks in *parrhesia* (Foucault, 1997, p. 382; Allen, 2003). Thus, Foucault describes free speech (*parrhesia*) as “the supreme act of self-legislation and autonomy, where truth rather than moral law plays the normative role” (Foucault, 1997, p. 382). To live the Enlightenment, according to Foucault, is to expose the arbitrary constraints of our present and refuse to consider them necessary (Foucault, 1997). This generates normativity without metaphysics: our obligation is to be true to ourselves through critique, not to obey any given transcendental content.

Foucault has been challenged by the critics. Some discern an ambiguity in his thinking, the radical deconstructing of the subject counterpointing its later exaltation in freedom. For example, Jürgen Habermas contended that Foucault’s ethical undertaking surreptitiously reinstates a constitutive subject, which he otherwise deconstructs (Habermas, 1987). Others (such as Allen, 2003) argue that Foucault merely disavows the Kantian model of autonomy and instead adopts a contingency-dependent model. Allen provides a comprehensive account of this debate, arguing that the paradox between genealogical

critique and normative engagement is a tension that, rather than being subversive, is productive of philosophy: genealogy provides the critical armaments while a minimalistic view of agency provides the normative orientation. In any case, Foucault clearly diverges from Kant: he neither appeals to a priori universal reason nor considers ethics to be grounded in duty exclusively. Instead, he grounds ethics in historically contingent forms of power/knowledge, and thinks of autonomy as the right to interrogate those forms.

So we have, on the one hand, Kantian pure autonomy (self-lawgiving through reason) and on the other a Foucauldian critical autonomy (agency enacted via historically located practices). These two stances seem irreconcilable: Kant has fixed human nature and rational universals; Foucault has contingency and creativity. Hegel compromises by requiring that norms be actually realized. Instead of telling us to take sides, the Continental tradition challenges us to combine these two perspectives: to hold on to the normative heart of autonomy, but to situate it historically and institutionally.

Historically situated critical agency

We formulate a synthesis that remains true to moral agency and normativity yet is historically embedded and acknowledges this embedding. We shall refer to this as the “historically situated critical agency” model. The basic concept is that people have the right and ability to make normative claims on their life and that they should take an active role in shaping their life, but that they do so as agents within particular practice, discourse and institutional environments. Autonomy is neither metaphysically given nor illusory; rather, it is the capacity to critically engage with one’s situated reality.

From Kant we retain the commitment to self-determination and universalizability of norms. This means we take seriously the moral agent’s capacity to say “no” to heteronomous forces and to formulate principles that aim for some kind of generality. However, we replace Kant’s transcendental ground with an immanent critique of social relations (in Hegel’s and Marx’s sense). In the spirit of Hegel, we recognize that what is deemed rational or legitimate is historically inflected: our rationale exists in institutions and custom and language; and language itself is an expression of reason. And yet, in the spirit of Foucault, we take those mediations themselves as objects of critique. We ask: How did this law or norm come to be? Whose interests does it serve? Are there discontinuities in the history of this concept?

Hence, normativity of historically situated subjects is reflexive and not transcendental. One is heir to a vocabulary of rights, values, and reasons of tradition; one is not a product “purely” of reason. But one can also ponder their origins and ends. Contemporary democratic citizens believe in freedom and equality because those are the values written into our political history. Yet she can still ask of the implementation: Are the ideals she claims (truth, justice, and so on) being embodied in our institutions? Can we think about them in other ways? This is precisely the Foucauldian focus on the present ontology: to identify how certain structures are historically contingent and mutable (Foucault, 1997).

In particular, an agent furnished with historical knowledge might participate in critical conversation as a member of communities. She concedes that some norms (human rights, say) have been established through collective struggle rather than emerging from rational apodicticity. Drawing on Habermas-like discourse ethics (but keeping a Continental style), one could justify norms by appeal to shared experiences and reciprocated reasons. Tradition lends weight to norms and that gives them authority, but their justification is democratic and historical. Pippin (1989) remarks that Hegel's position can be read in this way: what is rational is that which can withstand intersubjective criticism, temporally.

A second important factor is that there is plurality and contingency. Situated agents are all aware that they are just one incarnation of reason among many. Their world could have different standards than her own, and those standards could be valid in some fashion too. A critical agent does not simply assume her culture's categories are the only ones. She takes Foucault's lesson that what appears necessary today was contingent yesterday. This humility tempers absolutism without abandoning ethical stances: one can still fight injustice by invoking the ideals we have, but knowing they themselves had historical roots. This echoes Rousseau's insight (and Foucault's reading of Kant) that enlightenment means living with reason as public guide, while being aware of its own history.

Third, agency is transformative. We are not passive receptors of norms. The ability to change oneself and one's environment is built into this model. Hegel taught that freedom grows through struggle: the gap between "what is" and "what ought to be" generates self-consciousness (Obermayr, 2025). Foucault taught that we can seize the "cracks and contradictions" in reality to push for new possibilities (Obermayr, 2025). So autonomy becomes a praxis: e.g. activists, educators, writers, or scientists who seek to reform institutions use critique as a tool of freedom. Even mundane actions (how one lives one's daily life, whom one loves, how one educates) can be ways of negotiating norms. This idea links to feminist and critical theory: the personal and the social are inseparable, and autonomy requires collective movements.

Fourth, this model preserves normative commitment. It is not a nihilism. By rooting autonomy in history, we do not mean that "anything goes." On the contrary, Hegel's and Foucault's legacies both affirm the need for standards. For Hegel, rational norms come from humanity's collective self-realization, so there is always a dimension of "ought" internal to reality. For Foucault, such is the role of truth, that it orders us to resist domination and tend to the defenseless. With this focus on historical critique we have been pursuing deeper emancipatory ends: we seek normative resources that are already embedded within our social fabric. Vaccarino Bremner (2020) demonstrates that Hegelian critique can disclose "material conditions of production ... for a classless society" (p. 350), a deeply normative conception of freedom. Also, Foucault sees power and resistance linked: he states we are to "constitute ourselves differently" (Foucault, 1997, p. 317), there is a standard of autonomy implicit therein (the courage to question power).

In brief, historically-informed critical agency is to be a moral subject in the 'way of a worldly critic'. We recognize that institutions and language have formed our categories, our values, and our very desires.

Still, we have this ability to separate ourselves from those conditions, to critique them, and to choose to change them. This interpretation is consistent with Kant's insistence on self-legislation (each rational agent is the law-giver) yet locates the activity of legislation in a dialectic: the laws are given by us as selves through communal life, and they must be tested by historical reflection. It preserves the substance of autonomy, namely rational critique and normativity, while negating its prior solitary subject.

Implications for ethics and subjectivity today

This reconceptualization of autonomy carries far-reaching ramifications for the subject and ethics of today. Modern society has been characterized by increasingly complex institutions (states, markets, media, digital platforms) that shape individuals' subjectivity. From a Kantian standpoint, one might worry that these contexts are dehumanizing; from a Foucauldian standpoint, one might despair that power is everywhere. We argue for a synthesis view: agents are constituted by these structures, but can through critical agency constitute them in turn.

In practical ethics, this suggests that ethical reasoning is simultaneously principled and situational. The brake on this is that we can never say that ethics ultimately rests on academic metaphysics, but we also must not say that ethics ultimately rests on nothing but relativism. For example, think about human rights: they are not taken from a transcendental source, they are taken from centuries of social struggle and enlightenment discourse. The model also insists that we defend them on the basis of rational critique (we owe it to all as members of the community of speech) but remain open to contestation (we should ask how these rights work in different cultures and how they might be challenged or even enhanced). In current controversies (climate change, bioethics, social justice), critically-situated agents will call for reasons that others can accept, reasons that expose the historical interests that inform the different sides.

On the subject of subjectivity, historically specific autonomy is that we begin to view the self not as a pre-social entity nor as a matrix of ideology. This mixed perspective is echoed amongst many Continental theorists such as recognition theory (Honneth, 1995) and social constructivists (some feminist philosophers) who each contend that selves are socially constituted but acquire individuality through social interaction. Honneth's (1995) triadic model of recognition (intimate love, legal rights, and social esteem) aligns very closely with the prerequisites for the type of reflective self-governance imagined in this essay. However as Allen (2003) observes with justice, recognition theory may exaggerate the extent to which the very criteria for what is to be considered a recognizable subjectivity are themselves influenced by power; Foucauldian genealogy is required as an ongoing corrective. This is interconnected also with the intuitive sense of self-making in postmodern existence: individuals today often construct their identities (in careers, relationships, digital media) with the knowledge of ancestral narratives.

Neoliberal capitalism, technology, and other forces have conspired to press new demands upon subjectivity (the entrepreneur-self, the quantified citizen) that can be tremendously alienating. Honneth (2008) identifies this as reification: a pathological forgetting of the recognition that, capitalized or not,

sustains all real social relationships. Autonomy on this view is resistant to a purely universalist ethics: it invites agents to reflect upon the origin of these norms (e.g., whose interests are furthered by “market logic”?) while also opening a site where other norms and ways of living can be entertained or imagined (e.g., mutual aid networks, cooperative economies, new forms of democracy). It suggests ethics has to move beyond individual virtue to include critique of social institutions, but it also acknowledges individuals matter, that ethics is lived and contested in everyday choice.

The model also indicates that autonomy-coinciding with fostering critical consciousness must be taught. Not only should formal reasoning (Kantian) but historical literacy and self-reflection (Hegelian and Foucauldian) (Foucault, 1997) be taught. They should examine: what historical presuppositions does this moral principle rest on? How do power interests taint it? In democracies, citizenship is then not to be equated with passive obedience to laws, but active participation, as Kant originally recommended, albeit revised to take account of pluralism and power relations.

Finally, this conception of autonomy preserves a robust notion of normativity without requiring metaphysics. It affirms that we can critique social practices by appealing to standards (fairness, dignity, truth), but it locates those standards in our shared human practices and dialogues. We may cite Kantian ideas as a paradigm, but always with the historical awareness Foucault teaches. Thus moral autonomy after Kant becomes a postmetaphysical but no less demanding task: it is the work of theory and practice together, a continuing project of self-critique and social transformation in pursuit of reasoned freedom.

Conclusion: original contribution and the stakes of the argument

This paper has traced a path from Kant’s formal, transcendental autonomy through Hegel’s socialized and historicized freedom to Foucault’s genealogical and self-formative agency, and has proposed a synthesis, historically situated critical agency, that draws on all three traditions while reducing to none of them. In this concluding section, we make explicit what is philosophically original about this model by situating it against the most important existing positions in the literature.

The proposed model is not simply a restatement of Korsgaard’s constructivism. Korsgaard (1996) defends a version of Kantian autonomy by arguing that the normativity of practical reason is grounded in the reflective structure of agency itself: when we reflect on our own nature, we find we must commit to principles that constitute our practical identity. This is an erudite and powerful stance. Yet it keeps the Kantian ideal of deriving its normative force from the nature of rational agency itself, rather than relying on what form of agency the agent is embedded in in a particular historical or institutional milieu. The view advanced here moves away from Korsgaard at exactly this juncture: it argues that the very “reflective structure” Korsgaard locates is itself historically mediated. The content that constitutes our practical identity (what is a “reason” for me, which commitments make up my sense of who I am) is not handed down from a-historical reason but shaped by the traditions, institutions and power relations we are born into. Hegel (1821/1991) and Foucault (1997) agree, from different directions, that this historical

mediation is philosophically non-trivial; it is not a contingent supplement to an otherwise complete theory of normativity, but a constitutive condition of the very possibility of self-legislation.

The proposed model is also not identical to Honneth's recognition theory, though it draws heavily on it. Honneth (1995) argues that autonomy is made possible by, and socially dependent on, structures of mutual recognition; distorted recognition produces identifiable moral injuries that motivate emancipatory social struggle. The present paper endorses this social-relational account and incorporates Honneth's (2008) diagnosis of reification as a useful tool for contemporary critique. However, recognition theory tends to operate within a broadly immanent normative framework: it identifies the standards of successful recognition by reconstructing the normative presuppositions of existing social practices. What is underdeveloped in Honneth, and what Foucault supplies, is a genealogical dimension, a sustained questioning of whether the very norms of recognizable subjectivity are themselves effects of normalizing power. Allen (2003, pp. 55–62) makes this critical point persuasively: recognition theory, however critical, risks becoming conservative insofar as it takes as its normative benchmark the idealized self-understanding of existing social practices, which may themselves be products of domination. The present model avoids this conservative risk by building Foucauldian genealogy into the heart of the normative account, treating it not as an external corrective but as a permanent moment within the exercise of critical agency itself.

The proposed model is further distinguished from Allen's (2003) own reading of Foucault. Allen's important work shows how Foucault can be read as offering a poststructuralist form of autonomy, a "thin" or minimalist account of agency as the capacity to refuse and rewrite the identities that power inscribes. This is a crucial contribution, and the present paper builds directly on it. However, Allen's account tends to remain at the level of a deconstructive moment: it is better at identifying what to resist than at specifying any positive normative content for the exercise of critical agency. By integrating Hegel's account of immanent critique and developmental recognition, the present model supplies what Allen's Foucauldian autonomy lacks: a positive account of the social conditions and institutional forms through which critical agency is cultivated, sustained, and given determinate content. The result is a model that is more robust normatively than Allen's minimalism and more historically sensitive than Honneth's immanent recognition theory.

The proposed model is also distinct from the neo-Hegelian normative pragmatism of Pippin (1989) and Pinkard (2007). These thinkers rightly insist that freedom must be understood as an achievement of social and institutional life rather than a presupposition of it. Yet their readings tend to focus on the rational reconstruction of existing institutional forms: they ask what conditions make rational self-governance possible, without sufficiently thematizing the distortions that power introduces into those same institutions. In this respect, Pippin's and Pinkard's Hegel is too sanguine about the rationality immanent in modern ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), and risks underestimating the extent to which such institutions can be sites of domination as well as emancipation. The present model supplements neo-Hegelian normativity with the Foucauldian insistence that the rationality of any given institutional form must itself be subjected to genealogical interrogation.

What, then, is the positive original contribution of historically situated critical agency? It consists in three related philosophical moves. First, it argues that genealogical critique is not merely a negative operation, the unmasking of contingency, but a positive condition of autonomous self-governance: one cannot govern oneself in a genuinely autonomous fashion without understanding how one has been constituted by historical forces, and this understanding is itself practically enabling. Second, the model argues that the Hegelian account of recognition and institutional mediation and the Foucauldian account of power-knowledge and technologies of the self are not competing alternatives but complementary dimensions of a single account of situated agency: recognition theory specifies the social conditions of developmental freedom; genealogy specifies the critical vigilance required to prevent those conditions from hardening into new forms of domination. Third, the model puts forward a non-metaphysical normativity: our moral commitments do not have to be grounded in transcendent structures or ideal speech situations or ahistorical reflective equilibrium; the only thing that is required is the ongoing, practically executed activity of immanent critique comprising the readiness to expose our norms to critical scrutiny in light of both their historical origins and their projected futures.

This has implications for practice. The combination of the decline of deliberative democratic organizations, the ascent of surveillance capitalism, and the pathologization of dissent situates the model of historically situated critical agency as a philosophically based explanation for how and why individuals and groups can oppose domination that does not rely on transcendental grounds. It affirms that resistance to domination is not random but normatively structured, in that it is shaped by the traditions and reifications we inherit, that it is orientated by the ideal of recognition and mutual respect (that Honneth (1995) identifies) and that it is energized by genealogical courage (that Foucault (1997) pejoratively terms). Moral autonomy after Kant, on this view, is neither a Kantian faculty waiting to be exercised nor a Foucauldian fiction to be deconstructed: it is a practice: the ongoing, historically situated, socially mediated, critically vigilant work of making and remaking oneself as a responsible agent in the world.

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Informed consent

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Author Contribution

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Data Availability

This article is a conceptual and philosophical analysis based entirely on published sources (books, peer-reviewed articles, official documents, and publicly available reports), all of which are cited in the reference list. No new datasets, surveys, interviews, or other primary materials were generated or analysed in the course of this research, and no supplementary data files accompany this submission. Data sharing is therefore not applicable to this article.

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