

Interdependent Bodies:



RE-ENVISIONING WOMEN'S AUTONOMY WITH THE
HELP OF FEMINIST ETHICS AND NATURAL LAW

Interdependent Bodies

“My body,
my choice”



“That’s not your body,
it’s your baby’s body”

Women's Autonomy

Individualism

- ▶ the belief “that the single person is more important than the group” (Cambridge English Dictionary) and “that each person should think and act independently rather than depending on others” (Merriam-Webster)

Autonomy

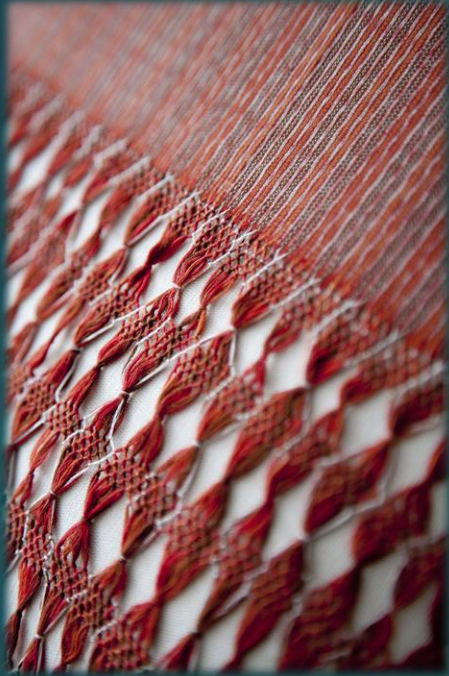
- ▶ “self-directing freedom” (Merriam-Webster)
- ▶ the power to determine one's own choices

Women's Autonomy

Autonomy raises moral questions:

- ▶ What if exercising my autonomy harms another person?
- ▶ If a woman's body and a baby's body are occupying the same space, can either of them exercise autonomy?
- ▶ When there's a conflict between two individuals, who wins and who loses, and how do we decide?

Women's Autonomy



Interdependence

- ▶ “the state of being dependent upon one another: mutual dependence” (Merriam-Webster)

The narrative of interdependence is inscribed in the human body from the moment life begins.

It's time to move beyond conflict-based models that pit mother and baby against each other and into an interdependence model.

Personhood

- ▶ Is given, not assigned or acquired
- ▶ Is experienced only as it is given away

Natural law

- ▶ what we discern in the everyday workings of the world that guides us in developing a moral framework for living

Personhood: Natural Law

- ▶ **Aristotle** (d. 322 BC): humans can use reason to discover laws of nature that explain how the world works
 - ▶ “man is by nature a political animal”
 - ▶ We instinctively organize ourselves in groups in order to pursue the good life
- ▶ **Thomas Aquinas** (1225-1274): humans are capable of using reason to understand the right and wrong ways to live
 - ▶ “it is natural for man...to be a social and political animal, to live in a group”
 - ▶ We naturally organize ourselves to promote the common good

Personhood: Natural Law

- ▶ Aristotle → Aquinas → Karol Józef Wojtyła, or **Pope John Paul II** (1920-2005)
 - ▶ Theology of the Body, teaching project (1978-2005)

“John Paul II’s philosophical approach begins with human experience.”

- ▶ Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners*, 2004, p. 15

“the body expresses the person” (John Paul II, Oct. 3, 1979)

- ▶ West, 2004, p. 23

- ▶ **A person is embodied**
- ▶ **A person is meant for relationship with others**

Personhood: Natural Law

▶ A person is embodied

In contrast to philosophical systems that deny an intrinsic connection between the body and the person...

- ▶ gnosticism
- ▶ materialism

...theology of the body affirms the essential wholeness of the body and the person.

I am “not just *a* body, but **somebody**.”

- ▶ West, 2004, p. 22 (italics in original)

- ▶ The body makes visible the invisible reality of the person
- ▶ I am not separate from my body, but I am more than my body
- ▶ When I come into existence, I have a body that is uniquely mine and no one else's

Personhood: Natural Law

▶ A person is meant for relationship with others

- ▶ The meaning and purpose of being human is **to love**
- ▶ Having a body means I can participate in the mystery of giving and receiving love
- ▶ Having a body means I am free to make the **choice to love** or not to love

“Freedom is given for love. It can lead to destruction and division, but it’s intended to bestow life and establish unity. It’s our *choice*.”

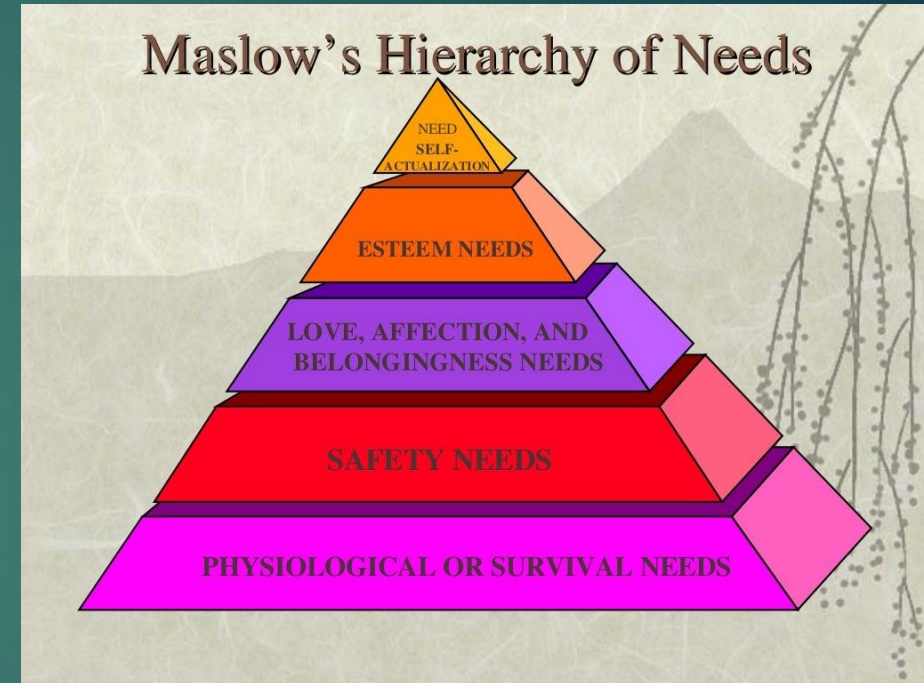
- ▶ West, 2004, p. 23

Personhood: Natural Law

► The Golden Rule of survival

Rely on your village!

- We instinctively form cooperative groups to meet our **mutual needs** for survival
 - Sharing
 - Division of labor
 - Intergenerational



Personhood: Natural Law

Throughout life, we generally choose the relationships we will belong to. Our primordial relationship occurs naturally, unchosen, and without effort:



the **MotherBaby dyad.**

Personhood: Feminist Ethics

- ▶ **Feminist autonomy is relational, not individualistic**

“By understanding the social and family relationships, context and constraints on woman's decision making, the pregnant woman and fetus retain their status as a single unit, with **fetal wellbeing best protected by supporting maternal wellbeing** (Harris, 2000; Laufer-Ukeles, 2011). This...reflects **feminist understandings of autonomy as a relational, rather than individualistic, construct....**”

- ▶ Jenkinson, Kruske, and Kildea, 2017, p. 7

Personhood: Feminist Ethics

“In light of the **interdependence of woman and fetus**... I argue that a more contextual, relational perspective of autonomy should be the goal of informed consent in the context of reproductive choices.”

► Laufer-Ukeles, 2011, p. 567

“In conflict-based models, maternal rights are considered to conflict with fetal rights..This [equality-based] model focuses on the **mutual needs of pregnant women and fetuses** rather than on their mutually exclusive needs.”

► Harris, 2000, p. 786

Personhood: Feminist Ethics

► Feminist autonomy values both members of the relationship equally

“The safety and emotional needs of the mother and baby are the same; *what is good for the mother is good for the child.*”

► Davis-Floyd, 2018, p. 328 (italics in original)

“Mother/fetus are seen in the medical model as a conflicting dyad rather than an integral unit. In the midwifery model, mother and fetus are genuinely one, and what meets the needs of the one meets the needs of the other.”

► Barbara Katz Rothman, midwife, in Davis-Floyd, 2018, p. 328

Not a conflict-based model! No hierarchy, no competition.

We don't have to pick a winner and a loser.

Personhood: The Fetus

1. Medical

- ▶ American Academy of Pediatrics (2017)
 - ▶ Consensus of the embryological community: life begins at conception (fertilization)
 - ▶ Can this settle the question of personhood?

2. Legal

3. Cultural

- ▶ Lack of consensus on the philosophical criteria for personhood (see Canteñs, 2019)



Personhood: The Fetus

We can solve the personhood problem intuitively by

observing the relationships that already exist in the world (**natural law**)
and
treating all beings and their relational units with equal dignity (**feminist ethics**)

- ▶ If being embodied makes one a person, the fetus is a person
- ▶ Fetus and mother belong to a relational unit with mutual needs, so fetus and mother share in personhood equally

The MotherBaby Dyad



Dyad

▶ Mamatoto

- ▶ “a group of two people, which is the smallest possible social group” (Cambridge English Dictionary)
- ▶ An irreducibly complex, indivisible community
- ▶ Two embodied souls coexisting in a shared environment

Interdependence and the “Obstetrical Dilemma”

- ▶ The MotherBaby dyad is a primordial necessity, created by the so-called “obstetrical dilemma”
 - ▶ The “big brain problem”
 - ▶ Believed to make birthing more complicated than in other species (see Cheyney, 2011)
 - ▶ Makes cooperation between mother and baby during the birth process essential



The Physiology of Interdependence

We are **mammals**:

we (1) gestate and

(2) give live birth to our young, which we then

(3) suckle from our mammary glands until their digestive system matures

► We are **primates**:

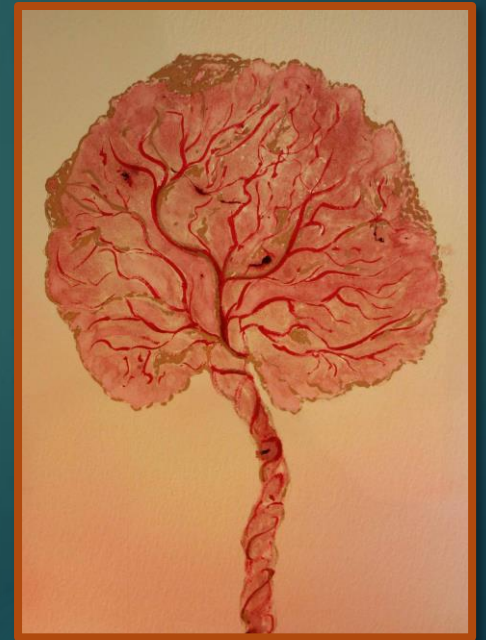
we (are designed to)

(4) carry our young on our bodies until they can walk independently

Throughout the continuum of pregnancy, birth, and postpartum, mother and baby are thoroughly intertwined and constantly sharing mutual feedback

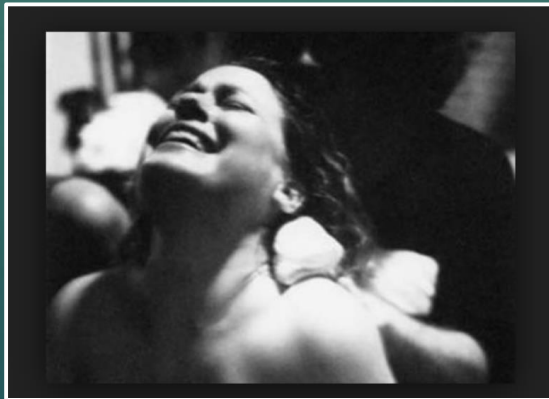
The Physiology of Interdependence: Pregnancy

- ▶ The placenta
 - ▶ Fetal tissue, but a shared organ with blood vessels attached to both mother and baby
 - ▶ Keeps maternal and fetal blood systems separate
 - ▶ Transfers nutrients and oxygen, carries away waste
 - ▶ Delivers one-third of the baby's blood to the baby after birth
 - ▶ Leave the cord intact!
 - ▶ Placenta can save the mother's life



The Physiology of Interdependence: Birthing

- ▶ Labor is a dance with mother and baby as partners
 - ▶ Hormones of labor
 - ▶ Maternal movement and fetal rotation
 - ▶ Oxytocin feedback loop – the “love hormone”



The Physiology of Interdependence: Birthing



The Physiology of Interdependence: Reconnection

“This is their **‘There you are!’** moment.”

- ▶ Carla “Baba” Hartley, elder midwife



- ▶ Skin-to-skin contact regulates baby's heart rate, body temperature, and breathing
- ▶ Mother shares her microbiome
- ▶ Reconnection:
“Ahhh...there you are!!!”

The Physiology of Interdependence: Breastfeeding

► What the mother does for the baby

- Nutrition
- Immune protection
- Sense of safety and connection

► What the baby does for the mother

- Triggers the “love hormone”
- Helps uterus shrink back to pre-pregnant size
- Triggers the body to build bigger, stronger bones
- Reduces risk of breast cancer



The Physiology of Interdependence: Babywearing

The newborn baby:

- ▶ Comfort, sense of safety
- ▶ Skin-to-skin regulates heart rate, body temperature, and breathing
- ▶ Breastfeeding on demand enhances weight gain



The newborn mother:

- ▶ Proximity to baby reduces risk of anxiety and depression
- ▶ Skin-to-skin promotes milk supply
- ▶ Breastfeed while doing small tasks

The safety and emotional needs of the mother and baby are the same;
what is good for the mother is good for the child."

▶ Davis-Floyd, 2018, p. 328

The Physiology of Interdependence: The Fourth Trimester

- ▶ A physiological imperative for the baby
 - ▶ Continue developing outside the womb
- ▶ A physiological imperative for the mother
 - ▶ Recover from the physical demands of pregnancy

The Five Universal Postpartum Needs:

1. an extended rest period
 2. nourishing food
 3. loving touch
 4. wise woman companionship
 5. contact with nature
- ▶ Johnson, *The Fourth Trimester*, 2017



*She can't do it without her
village!*

The Physiology of Interdependence: *Mamatoto*

The baby's transition from inside to outside the mother's body doesn't change the relationship

Mamatoto

- ▶ Swahili for “motherbaby”
- ▶ “This word reflects the understanding that, in the early postpartum months, mother and baby are interconnected and interdependent physically, energetically, and spiritually.”
 - ▶ Johnson, *The Fourth Trimester*, 2017

The Bonded Triad

“In its fullest inclusive concept, mamatoto expands to embrace another necessary intimate party, the devoted father of the baby/ partner of the woman.



► Judy Edmunds, *Midwifery Today*, 2001

In its healthy expression, this bonded triad is strongly united, **interdependent**, freely and fiercely supportive of each other's welfare.”

When the Bonded Triad Breaks Down

Problems in her primary relationship (usually her partner/the baby's father) can put pressure on a mother to contemplate ending her pregnancy

Reproductive coercion

- ▶ A form of intimate partner abuse in which a woman's partner denies her the freedom of choice to achieve or avoid pregnancy (Moore, Frohworth, & Miller, 2010)
- ▶ The partner may sabotage the woman's contraception (Clark et al., 2014)
- ▶ The partner may attack the woman in an effort to kill her fetus or threaten her with violence if she does not get an abortion (Coggins & Bullock, 2003; Moore, Frohworth, & Miller, 2010)
- ▶ Is associated with other forms of intimate partner abuse and violence (see Clark et al., 2014)

Violence

- ▶ Acts like pushing, hitting, kicking, slapping, choking (see Foster, 2020)
- ▶ Also includes driving recklessly, rough sex, threats of violence, breaking objects, and harming pets

When the Bonded Triad Breaks Down

- ▶ **Seeking an abortion is a red flag that reproductive coercion has likely occurred**

A majority of women having abortions report they didn't really want them, and a majority of women also report feeling pressured to get an abortion, often by their male partner

- ▶ More than half of women who obtain abortions say their pregnancy was not unwanted
- ▶ As many as 64% of women who obtain abortions felt pressured or coerced into the abortion, often by a partner (Rue, Coleman, Rue, & Reardon, 2004)
- ▶ At least half of women who experience significant post-abortion problems, like grief and depression, felt pressured into the abortion (see Burke, 2002)

When the Bonded Triad Breaks Down

- ▶ **Seeking abortion is a red flag for violence in the relationship**

If a woman feels endangered by physical violence from her partner, she is willing to travel significantly farther to obtain an abortion (Ely and Murshid, 2021)

- ▶ Between 2.5% and 8% of women name IPA as the reason for their abortion (Foster, 2020; Chibber, Briggs, Roberts, & Foster, 2014)
- ▶ A far larger number (31%) name general relationship problems, such as an unstable relationship or unsupportive partner
- ▶ However, anywhere between 6% and 22% of all women having abortions report experiencing recent violence (Roberts et al., 2014)
 - ▶ This suggests that more (perhaps many times more) abortions are occurring in the context of a relationship characterized by violence than are being reported

When Is a Choice not a Choice?

What affects one member of the dyad affects the other.

Mother and baby are both losing in this situation.

Up to 64% (or more) of women who obtain abortions are doing so against their will.

The breakdown of the bonded triad forces women to sacrifice one member of the relational unit to save another. A woman who chooses abortion in response to reproductive coercion or physical violence is ***making a forced choice, not an autonomous decision.***

MotherBaby Autonomy: A Call to Action

► “What can I do?”

- Do I have a friend who needs help leaving a coercive or violent relationship?
- Do I know a newborn mom who needs a postpartum village?

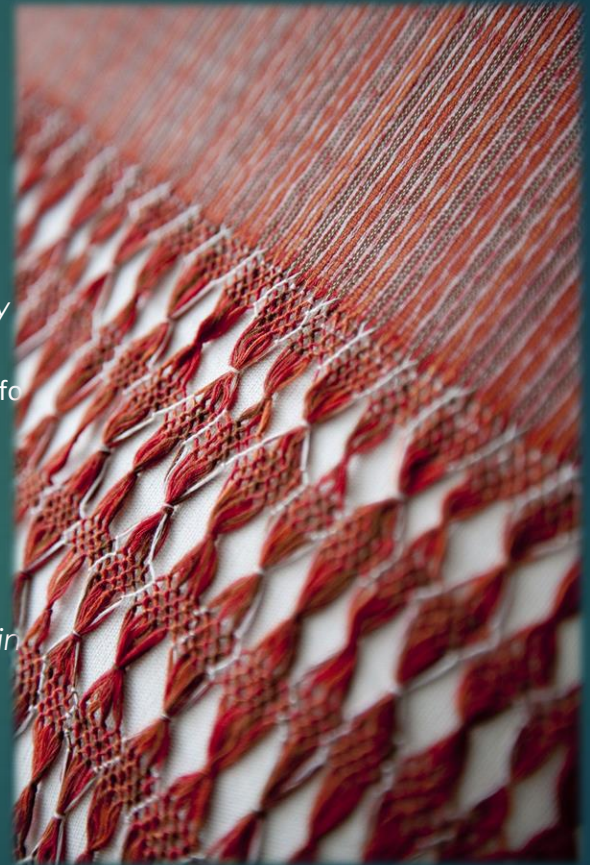


► What is my community doing to support pregnant families and families under stress?

- Diapers, car seat, baby clothes, maternity clothes
- Childcare
- Help navigating the maternity care system and understanding their medical rights
- Workplace accommodations
- Parenting support
- Relationship skills

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