

Allison Weir

*Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory between Power and Connection*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2013

ISBN 879-0-19-993688-5

Jennifer Benson (Washington College)

**Jennifer Benson** is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Washington College, in Chestertown, Maryland. She is also a regular contributor to and administrator for Midwest U.S. Society for Women in Philosophy. She researches and teaches at the intersection of feminism, political theory, race theory, and post-colonial thought. Recent publications include "Freedom as Going Off Script" in *Hypatia*, Spring 2014, Volume 29 and a co-authored article, with Allison Wolf, "Where Did I Go? The Invisible Postpartum Mother" in *Philosophical Inquiries into Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering* (2012). Her abiding research concern centers on the concept of freedom as it emerges in conjunction with post-colonial feminist thought.

jbenson2@washcoll.edu

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In *Identities and Freedom*, Allison Weir undertakes the project of inventing feminist conceptions of freedom. Feminists have not ignored freedom; in fact, we might think that it is the central concern of feminists engaged in resisting the status quo. Indeed, if feminism isn't about freedom, "then I wonder what else it could be about?" says Weir (122). Further, *Identities and Freedom* is offered as feminists have reinvigorated inquiry into the term *freedom*. Some recent book-length contributions include *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom*, by Nancy J. Hirschmann (2002); *A Theory of Freedom: Feminism and the Social Contract*, by Shay Welch (2012); *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom*, by Cynthia Willett (2008); *Queering Freedom*, by Shannon Winnubst (2006); and *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, by Linda M. G. Zerilli (2005). Yet we have not invented enough senses for freedom. What should we mean by freedom? This is the problem addressed and answered in Weir's *Identities and Freedom*.

Weir argues that feminist inquiry into freedom must move beyond the commitments of liberalism. Feminism, quite rightly, begins with a critique of oppression. One way to conduct feminism in a liberal mode is by adopting the view that overcoming oppression is a matter of removing the legal inequalities, material impositions, and psychic restrictions that disempower women. To overcome oppression is to throw off an externally imposed cage. As Weir notes, whether one uses the term *individual*, or *self*, or *agent*, in liberalism the project of achieving freedom from oppression assumes that a person engages in independent self-definition and acts in resistance to the external authority of others, including social institutions. Absent successful resistance, self-discovery, and self-making, a person is variously described as oppressed, inauthentic, or false.

Weir seeks to move beyond the liberal project because the conceptions of the individual and external authority do not adequately describe how identities are formed, modified, and sustained. Weir turns to the analysis of post-structuralist thinkers, notably Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, because they capture the moment-by-moment ways that we are fashioned not only as

docile beings who fit within existing social institutions, but also how we are made into capable beings who can form goals for action, pursue those goals, and enjoy our agency. On a post-structuralist analysis it is inappropriate to congratulate the authenticity achieved through a supposedly independent labor of self-making. To pursue liberation, humans must live in social worlds that discipline them to seek this personal achievement, to make dexterous use of the social resources that sustain the work of self-making, and to desire this authenticity. For post-structuralism, then, the supposedly external institutions and values of the surrounding social milieu are *not external*; they live within us, making us both pliant and capable.

If feminism begins with a critique of oppression, while also acknowledging the comprehensive disciplinary regimes that sculpt our identities and desires, and yet also retaining some notion of freedom, then we cannot posit freedom as independent self-definition. How should we understand freedom?

Weir breaks new ground, arguing for *freedom as belonging*: a form of freedom that acknowledges the discipline and category ascription that shape our identities as well as our elective and transformative practices, even those of subordination. In doing so, she exposes the utility and the limits of three feminist resources: contemporary liberalism, identity politics, and post-structuralism. The conceptual analysis of identity and freedom, as well as the practical investigation of transformational living, are necessary and invigorating for feminists seeking resources for overcoming oppression.

In chapter 1, Weir examines conceptions of identity offered by Charles Taylor and Foucault, synthesizing the two while avoiding liberal individualism. The analysis relies on both early and later Foucault and further advances ideas implied in *Care of the Self*. Weir prompts the reader to think carefully about philosophical problems that are difficult to balance, namely questions of identity, the meaning of life, the tension between individual and community, and the interacting systems of power and authority through which we come to self-knowledge. Further, Weir makes an otherwise highly abstract chapter concrete by using two characters in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* as contrasting case studies in identity. The result is that the insights of Taylor and Foucault, in spite of being at odds, are woven together. Weir does not allow the analysis of disciplinary power to dominate understanding, and she declines Taylor's conservative, communitarian question "to what and to whom am I importantly connected?" (28–29). Instead, she asks us to balance first-person identity questions with a third-person perspective on ascribed categories, and an affective awareness of our chosen recognition relationships. We ask "who am I?" and "what matters to me?" while acknowledging both the categories that feature strongly in our lived realities and the coalitional, resistant relationships we cultivate (31). Identity, theorized by Weir, is a matter of affective social connections maintained through choice and practice. Identity is not an ascribed artifact of discipline, not an affirmed essence located through soul-searching, not an unchanging essence defined by necessary and sufficient conditions. For Weir, identity is both a category and a self-understanding, forged in a complex network of dialogue and recognition.

In chapter 2, Weir focuses on affective communities of choice, aiming to discern the values through which we should perceive and seek to produce the kinds of social connections that can be a home for the self-in-transformation. The chapter tracks feminist discussions of home and

community, especially the risks of an uncritical valorization of the private sphere (47-48), the reliance on ideals of private property and noninterference (55-56), as well as the need for homes and intimate relationships as domains in which self-understanding can be affirmed and challenged by those who help sustain us (57-58). The material is satisfyingly diverse, weaving together Patricia Hill Collins, Frederick Douglass, Bonnie Honig, bell hooks, Cynthia Willett, and Iris Marion Young. Weir makes the abstract material more compelling by using Minnie Bruce Pratt's "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart" as well as Douglass's writings on creating a home after escape from slavery. Freedom, as Weir argues, is not to be found in independence or in living at the lonely, leading edge of aesthetic invention. Instead, freedom requires relationships of love and connection (58, 60). Weir has offered convincing support for retaining the concept of home, and has provided resources to continue questioning the values and ways of interacting that could best help us to create and sustain contemporary feminist communities.

In chapter 3, "Feminism and Transformative Identity Politics," Weir uses the conception of identity developed in chapter 1 to generate a modified form of identity politics that can serve as a resource for global feminism. This is an important addition to the contemporary discussion of feminism and freedom. To modify identity politics, Weir brings together two feminist debates: first, the criticism of essentialism in identity politics, and second, the need for feminist practice that fosters and sustains identification with and solidarity among feminists as we work to overcome the diverse and interwoven challenges presented by oppression. Weir holds these threads together in clarifying how we ought to understand identity and comprehend what it means for a person to be free. She shows that conceptualizing identity as a rigid metaphysical category is unhelpful; however, identity can refer to "*identification with* ideals, each other, and defining communities" (3). This move is intended to replace metaphysics with politics (69). Drawing on the resources developed in the first chapter, Weir demonstrates that identity as *identification with* means we are better equipped to examine and pursue engagement with feminist challenges understood globally (74-76).

Chapter 4, "Transforming Women," extends the groundwork of chapters 2 and 3 by offering a critique of our investment in a static conception of women. Though continental and North American Anglo feminists have generated a robust criticism of structural and intuitional forms of oppression with the goal of overcoming oppression, we are mired in a metaphysical trap: *woman* as a category is understood as essentially oppressed (88). Both critical of and indebted to Butler and Zerilli, Weir argues that we must understand women as open to resignification and reinvention through recognition relationships (90-92) that include important affective relations with one another (97-98), including our homes, from chapter 2. Transformation is possible because we have recognition relationships that cannot be adequately described in terms of metaphysical binaries, recognition relationships that cannot be exhaustively described as an unmodified circulation of power (8-9, 91, 93). *Woman* as a category and women's identities are multiply determined, multiply constituted, and multiply affirmed in their many *with*-worlds (94). Weir argues that paying attention to the ways we engage in identification *with* one another---contested identifications and coalitional identifications---generates a more accurate understanding of identities, especially the transgressive and transformative work that can arise through these relationships. Further, when Weir argues for a politics that focuses on transforming women, she clears a path for feminists to move beyond the trap of *ressentiment* (111) while retaining the lessons learned in the self-critical history of second-wave thought.

Such lessons are assets from radical feminism and critical race theory, assets to be retained as we constitute and reconstitute our identities, enable and define new possibilities. Thus freedom in its various forms is enacted and practiced through identities forged *with* one another and requires not independence but an ongoing act of opening toward one another (113, 115). The chapter is a success: It advances a conception of freedom that moves beyond liberalism; synthesizes crucial resources from Butler, Zerilli, and the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective; and ultimately advances the tradition of radical feminism as transformative identity politics.

In chapter 5, "Feminism and the Islamic Revival: Freedom as a Practice of Belonging," Weir's metaphysical and political arguments of the prior chapters are synthesized with the concrete details of living a transformative freedom. Weir draws on Saba Mahmood's investigation of the women's piety movement of Cairo, Egypt. Can there be freedom in subordination? (119) is the question that frames the chapter. Weir's answer is yes: such a relationship is one in which identities are forged *with* God---not through independence---through an ongoing act of opening toward God (129). Weir's final chapter is rewarding in several ways. First, the formerly abstract concepts and values are expressed with a rich example. Second, the investigation of belonging as a form of freedom initiates a line of investigation by which transformative identity politics will be a resource for exploring and practicing yet more forms of freedom. Third, Weir's chapter addresses the hard question of whether we are prepared to move past the assumption that freedom and subordination are mutually exclusive.

Without a doubt, Weir's *Identities and Freedom* is a success; however, I offer criticism and suggestions regarding the second and third chapters. The material synthesized in chapter 2 is satisfyingly diverse but could be augmented. Weir argues that freedom requires relationships of love and connection. Such themes are also featured in Sarah Lucia Hoagland's *Lesbian Ethics* (1989), where she examines the values that obstruct women's openness to one another, the risks of subordination, and alternative values that foster openness that nurture identity transformation. Hoagland's work would also offer a challenge to Weir's explication of freedom as subordination, thereby allowing an additional test for Weir's thesis.

Chapter 3, although important and successful, is open to several points of criticism. First, in this chapter Weir seeks to replace metaphysics with politics. Metaphysics is difficult, perhaps impossible to escape, and there are many reasons that feminists have sought to avoid metaphysical, especially essentialist claims. However, I am unconvinced that Weir's replacement of *metaphysics* with *politics* is possible. Metaphysics is a matter of what exists, and this need not be an existence predicated on an essence. What exists can be made through practice. Thus, I would describe Weir's openly Hegelian project (69) as shifting from a metaphysics of stasis to a metaphysics of process, wherein a person is understood as an identity forged and reformed in ongoing interactions and practices (70-71). On related grounds, chapter 3 will not satisfy those who expect yet more investigation into problems of essentialism and how categories can operate in human cognition without positing essentialism. For example, the chapter does not point to some of the more recent work on the category *woman*, notably that of Marilyn Frye (2011). This lack of inclusion can be more than forgiven, however, if we read Weir as creating a route to feminist practice that assumes a metaphysics that has successfully engaged identities as ongoing projects and assumes the category *woman* can be conceived without the essentialism. Weir may be read, fairly and to best effect, as applying and extending

nonessentialist (transformative) identity politics to effect global feminist change. Finally, the material in chapter 3 is abstract, and the concrete practice of *global identification with* is not fully visible in this chapter. For elaborate and concrete detail, one must wait for the fifth, culminating chapter. Regardless of these criticisms, chapter 3's abstract and forward-looking inquiry provides a compelling account for retaining an updated version of identity politics.

When Weir asks, "can there be freedom in subordination?" she has placed a probing test question before theorists of freedom. It is a question that returns us to the overall goal of the book, to formulate meanings for freedom that do not rely upon the overt or covert assumption that independence of self-understanding is necessary for freedom. Are we prepared to accept that subordination can give rise to freedom? If the reader cannot unlock the binary opposition of freedom and subordination, then one may balk and return to a liberal position. Alternatively, one may refuse the dilemma and seek to investigate fresh ways to use identity politics and post-structuralism to produce a different analysis of identity and ultimately different forms of freedom. Finally, one may adopt Weir's understanding of transformative identity politics and continue the theoretical analysis and practical elaboration of yet more forms of freedom. With Weir's project and such options before us, contemporary feminists interested in freedom are privileged to have exciting prospects!

Feminism needs work on freedom. For feminist literature that attempts to move beyond the liberal tradition, it is seldom clear what we mean or could mean by the term *freedom*. Yet for those feminists still seeking to investigate a domain that is radical and post-structuralist in its origin, our work must anticipate, invent, and clarify forms of freedom that diverge from liberal assumptions. We require a rich set of definitions and practices so we may better chart the directions toward which we should work and avoid lapsing into forms of feminist living that intentionally or unintentionally employ inadequate conceptions of freedom. In this domain, Weir's text excels and advances the field of enquiry. *Identities and Freedom* will assuredly promote the work of feminists invested in the metaphysics and politics of freedom.

#### Reference

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