



Volume 30, Number 1, May 2023

Editor's Forum

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In the sphere of health ethics, there is perhaps no principle given more weight, more significance, and more authority than “autonomy”. Composed from *autos* “self” and *nomos* “custom or law”, the term autonomy expresses a self-governing, a freedom from external control, an absence of controlling influences, an independence, a freedom as liberty. Following, when we add the qualifier “bodily” to autonomy, we may understand autonomy in a way that expresses control over the body and bodily processes. In other words, “my body, my choice”.

Now, while I profess that I prescribe to this mantra—“my body, my choice”—should we not also wonder whether there is something missing from its formulation? Something not quite true about “my body, my choice”? Has my body always been my own? Has it ever been my own? What aspects of bodily autonomy are beyond our control? Is there a foreignness to our body's sovereignty?

The truth is that our bodies are of the flesh of the world. This is evident not merely from a study of the materials from which our bodies develop, but also from how we develop quite literally as embodied bodily beings. From the very start, before we even have a sense of self or other, our body is inherently relational and intersubjective. Birth itself does

not individuate the body, as a newborn remains dependent not only on others to have their needs met; but also the child's very subjectivity would appear to be one in which divisions of self and other may be difficult to demarcate (see van Manen, 2018). And as we age, the lived body develops its operative intentionality and reflective structures directed towards and open to the world in which it is situated

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Bodies in Relationship: Personal Autonomy and Flourishing

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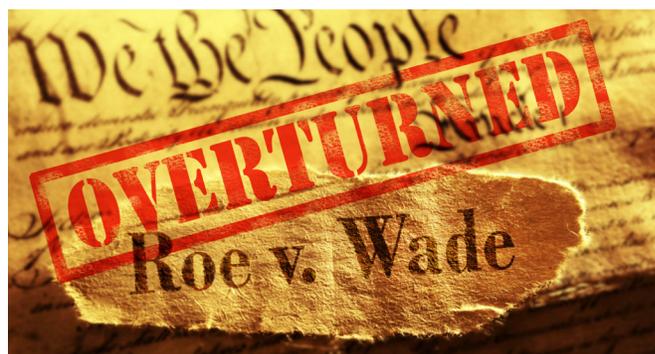
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When we first began thinking about bodies and freedoms, we quickly acknowledged the ambiguous nature of "autonomy", particularly "bodily autonomy", in its current manifestation in western culture. We noted how bodies as autonomous exist as relational (in and among ourselves and others), dignified (as human and inherently good), independent (knowing, deciding, and acting), embodied (that by which we experience the world), developing (growing, evolving, flourishing), and grace-filled (able to give and receive love).

We also noted that bodies simultaneously exist as fetishized (idolized and obsessed over), objectified (othered and disconnected from a self, a person, a flesh), consumed (regulated by a culture itself obsessed with youthfulness), ignored (rendered invisible, talked over/around, transgressed), colonized (expropriated or dispossessed by innumerable oppressors), and frequently traumatized (violated, deprived, and abused). While intellectual discourses theorize about the nature of "the body", body and flesh enact their natures independently and collectively.

We further recognized that bodies are afforded the luxuries of autonomy to differing degrees: for some bodies expressing, reaching toward, and/or enacting autonomy, is more difficult than for others. Female bodies, racialized bodies, disabled bodies, or fluid bodies, for example, continue frequently to be contested, dishonoured, and shamed. The recent evolution of our understanding of autonomy

knows it as a principle, as relational, as contextual and socially constructed, and, often, as illusory in its manifestation.



Our theme here is "Bodily Autonomy", in the light of unfolding attempts to, once again, control female bodies, particularly reproductive bodies. As the regression of women's and others' reproductive control is playing out in the United States, as the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade (Liptak, 2022), we know these threats lie close to the bone of women around the globe. And let us be clear: reproductive control is about far more than choosing (or not) to get pregnant, to carry a pregnancy to term, or to access reproductive health services that facilitate bodily autonomy. Reproductive control is about socio-economic standing, it is about enfranchisement, and it is about lingering misogyny that has never really dissipated. We will not restrict our discussion to reproductive bodily autonomy. Rather, we will also explore and complexify our perceptions of autonomy, recognizing that it is messy and difficult, primarily because it is not only about bodies but also

about flesh; the flesh and blood of my body-soul, my embodied soul-self.

Overview of Autonomy

We understand autonomy as a principle and, indeed, a right. Since 1979, Beauchamp and Childress have been articulating, explicating, and defending “autonomy” as a foundational principle in biomedical ethics. Autonomy sits alongside Justice, Beneficence, and Non-Maleficence in the so-called “Holy 4” set of principles of biomedical ethics (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019/1979; Childress & Beauchamp, 2022).

We also understand autonomy as relational, in contrast to any sense of autonomy as unfettered individualism. Relational autonomy extends the principle into its context and recognizes that enacting personal bodily autonomy is always in relationship with oneself, one’s significant others, and one’s environment.

We also understand autonomy as socially constructed, that is, as an extension of relational autonomy (or, autonomy as relational). Explicitly feminist perceptions of autonomy recognize the constructed nature of our cultures and social structures, constructions that shape personal and communal autonomy. Context and construct shape autonomy and reach beyond immediate relationships into social structures that shape and bind our capacity for autonomous choices.

Problematizing Autonomy

In our conversations, we also recognized that autonomy can be messy to enact. Its complexity reaches beyond an “either/or” dichotomy of being autonomous or not. It is, rather, a “both/and” proposition – we enact autonomy in a multitude of ways in which our relationships collide with the realities of our environment, situation, and limitations. Typically, these collisions are nuanced by experience.

Autonomy is also ambiguous. While an essential aspect of respectful care, autonomy will always be limited to the options offered to us and our capacity to grasp and evaluate those options. Further, autonomy will always be limited within the

structures of care in place and the forces that shape those structures of care (e.g., finances, political will, ideological leanings). Thus, we will not always be free to choose well from the options before us and will thereby lay witness to the ambiguity of autonomy.

Autonomy is, finally, in many respects, illusory. We will touch on this in more depth, to demonstrate that the illusion of autonomy is laid bare in the small acts of transgression that, despite our best efforts, will interrupt another’s autonomy, whether at the bedside or in consultation. These small actions feed and lay groundwork for the larger acts of transgression.

We might further problematize autonomy as it relates to the body. Feminist perceptions of autonomy understand it not only as relational but also as contextual. Cole Arthur Riley, a Black American writer, addresses blackness, bodies (her body), spirituality, and health in the context of white, American evangelicalism (2022), noting that it is easier for black bodies to be colonized and used “toward whiteness’s own ends” when they are experienced as detached from their souls (p. 59). Autonomy is directly related to the context in which one’s body and, therefore, one’s soul, exists. If the context is submission and oppression, bodily autonomy will be hard won.

Body, Bodies, & Flesh

Considering recent developments regarding reproduction and reproductive freedoms (and/or controls) in the United States, the illusion of bodily autonomy for child-bearers is now writ large. No longer tacit, on the margins of political discourse, reproducing bodies are now explicitly controlled, paternalized, circumscribed, and, thereby, diminished in political and social discourse. One might, in fact, be excused for believing that the original *Roe v. Wade* (Liptak, 2022), decision itself was an historical anomaly of respect for female bodies. Reproducing bodies seem now to be back under the surveillance of regulating overseers.

In the discourse regarding abortion, the “Pro-life” vs. “Pro-choice” dichotomy has proven unhelpful. The discussion seems to have devolved into camps

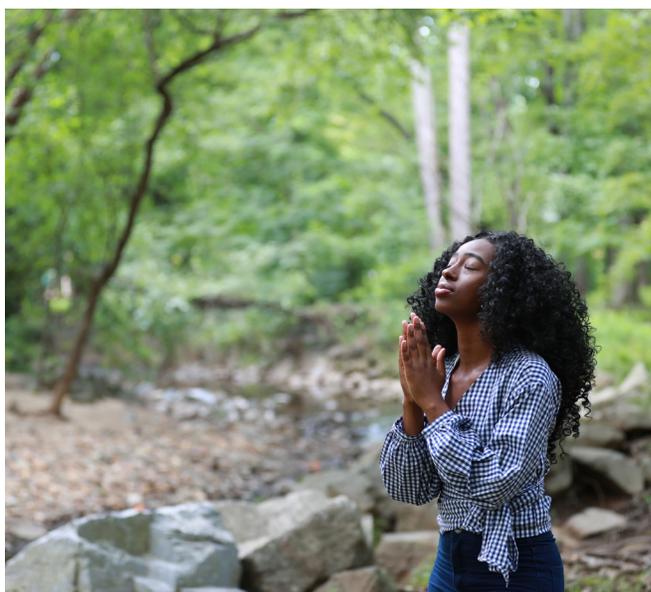
identifying as either pro-fetal-autonomy (which strangely seems more like pro-birthing than pro-life) or pro-reproducing-female body autonomy. The pro-life discourse includes a subtle movement to include an anti-choice component, shifting the focus from the fetus to the pregnant person. This “strategy” suggests that people are pressured into having abortions and emphasize the physical risks associated with abortion, but its goal remains the same: to restrict access to free and legal abortions (Cannold, 2002). Nonetheless, this language and the dichotomy it strengthens are mostly useless because they simplistically distill bodies, pregnancy, and reproduction, into one autonomous choice. This dichotomy further separates the body from its context and multi-faceted self, as though any given person cannot be both pro-life and pro-choice, embodied and spiritual, reproductive and autonomous.

Flesh, on the other hand, is the realm of unity. To speak of one’s flesh is to announce one’s being as both one with and separate from another’s flesh - we share fleshy realities, even when we do not share bodies. In her elegant reflection on the bodies and flesh that constitute the world we inhabit, feminist theologian Mayra Rivera (2015) critiques a dichotomous, historical construction of the human as flesh or spirit, rather than flesh and spirit. This perception stems from a construction of the flesh as that which causes sin, and a fear of the vulnerability and change inherent to physical bodies. “A view of bodies as materially constituted in relation to the world nurtures a richer and more dynamic view of corporeality. ‘Flesh’ accents the complex texture of those relations - their inherent multiplicity; the sedimentation of past events; the constant flow of elements in and out of bodies” (p. 12). These relations in turn engender social structures and norms that participate in the “constitution of the flesh of the world” (p. 13).

Taking up Rivera’s (2015) Christian theological account of bodies and flesh, we suggest that they have everything to do with the Divinity of the human body in the person of Jesus. We honor the divinity of human bodies and flesh as God’s entry into the

material world, that is, God’s autonomous choice to become embodied. Thus, bodily autonomy assumes the divinity of the flesh - or - in less religious terms, bodily autonomy assumes the shared humanity of flesh, in and by which we encounter each other and transcend into flourishing. Bodily autonomy is, therefore, always relational, always complex, and always constituted of this flesh.

We offer the final thought of this half of our reflection to Mayra Rivera (2015), who outlines the profound and beautiful implications of our fleshiness – our embodied soul-selves. The possibility of bodily autonomy will ever be embedded in the social reality of “coexistence in the flesh of the world” (p. 157). Through bodies we promote or delimit autonomy and the flourishing of some over others. As she notes, “flesh is worldly” (p. 157). Insofar as our bodily autonomy is inextricably linked to the complexity of human relationship, so too is our flourishing.



In the coming paragraphs, we will put flesh on the bones of our discussion of bodily autonomy. All embodied discourse must bear the weight of practical application; in our case, in the realm of healthcare and ethics. As presented above, bodily autonomy is complex and, at times, transgressed. We attempt to articulate the practical circumstances in which that complexity and transgression are frequently on display.

Putting Flesh on the Bones of a Relational Autonomy

Placing our attention on autonomy as a nuanced and relational idea has revealed the inadequacy of thinking about bodily autonomy, and specifically abortion, in an unproblematic way. That is, to equate bodily autonomy with ‘freedom of choice’ as the flipside to ‘pro-life’ perspectives, negates its complexity. A thoughtful consideration of bodily autonomy might better consider where the conversation begins than ending the conversation by declaring that “all people deserve their autonomy to be respected”. And although we will consider the nuances and influences that might go into making a decision about getting an abortion, beyond the popular dichotomous discourse, we further explore the notion of bodily autonomy by reflecting on some small acts of transgression that happen in everyday healthcare practices. These gestures and actions are not matters for consideration by the U.S. Supreme Court, nor will they make the headlines or sponsor international conversations. Instead, these smaller transgressions are often quite invisible, hidden in the fabric of efficiency and protocol, the policy and expediency that is modern healthcare.

Disrupting the Dualism of Rights to Life or Choice

Let us look at an example of a pregnant woman considering whether or not to have an abortion. Psychologist Carol Gilligan recounts a story of a woman who is a nurse and whose husband is a roofer, but currently out-of-work (Big Think, 2012). She is Catholic. She has scoliosis of the spine and a one-year-old child. Her doctor tells her that if she continues the pregnancy, she may be unable to work or care for her child. Gilligan notes that figuring out what to do probably does not include asking whose rights take precedence, but rather notes that a better question asks: What is the *responsible* thing to do when you find yourself in a situation of relationship, where there seems to be no way of acting that will not cause hurt? What does she do in relationship to herself and her faith, her existing child, her husband, her spine? She

is likely influenced by several other considerations, whether she is conscious of them or not: What does a good mother do? A good Catholic? A good wife? A good woman?

There are still other relational questions around the ethics of abortion. We must ask what it means to be an unwanted child? What does it mean to carry a pregnancy that resulted from an unwanted interaction? What does it mean to be forced to have a child? What does it mean to know you cannot take care of another child? These questions aim to capture the meaningfulness of what is at stake when an abortion is being considered, and a choice needs to be made. “Autonomy” may be illusory for this pregnant nurse if we consider it in the bioethics meaning of having the capacity to make an informed and uncoerced decision (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019/1979). For example, is it possible for the nurse to be fully informed about the child that may be born from this pregnancy into poverty with an injured mother? Is it possible for her to feel fully uncoerced and uninfluenced; is it possible for the decision not to be shaped by the need to care for their existing child, to financially support their family, and to preserve her own health? We grapple with questions such as these, questions that demand us to consider and feel and respond, not with a neat answer about autonomy, but with the most fitting action for this pregnant, fleshy body, spatially and temporally situated, embedded in life and family.



bodily autonomy. If these violations are concealed by routine procedures and habits, that is, if we cannot see them, if we do not notice them and if we do not recognize them as harms, we cannot address them. Then, in fact, the people, their bodies, have been colonized.



It may seem that we have offered a peculiar and indirect approach to the topic of bodily autonomy, entangled as it is with abortion in modern discourses. We have not offered a full-throated defense of bodily autonomy to support women's and other's rights when making choices about abortion. Instead, we have offered our own kind of rebellious response, by intentionally avoiding the dichotomous argument of pro-life vs. pro-choice that has been unhelpful for a long time, a false dichotomy because it conflates such a simplistic distillation of bodies, pregnancy, reproductive freedom, all into one dichotomous choice. Instead, we have problematized the terms, recognized and made space for the complexity, ambiguity, and even illusory nature of autonomy. We have sought to locate our exploration not only in the marquis nature of the abortion question, but also in the everyday healthcare practices that go unnoticed, and are not necessarily hospitable to the cultivation and support of bodily autonomy, including that of both the people in care and the practitioners who provide that care. We will end with these questions: Could it be that we struggle with gaining respect for the bodily autonomy of pregnant people and women, not to mention black and brown bodies,

transgender and fluid bodies, disabled and poor bodies, because we are standing on a ground of sand in healthcare? A ground upon which we do not regularly respect and nurture bodily autonomy in our daily, ordinary practices of caring for another? Have these small violations made possible the large acts of transgression, laying the path for the revocation of bodily autonomy and coming to fruition in decisions that repeal pregnant people and women's right to make decisions about their own complicated, messy, entangled lives? What autonomy do we actually afford those for whom we care?

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The Imaginary

Speaking of Love

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Introduction

ME: Tell me about love.

OLD WOMAN: It is our only real choice. The only thing that we can truly give.

ME: How do we do that?

OLD WOMAN: Choose it above all else . . . It is the most important choice we can make for each other.

ME: Those closest to us, you mean.

OLD WOMAN: No. Everyone. Everything. Widening our circle at every opportunity.

ME: Sounds hard.

OLD WOMAN: So is being born. But we all do it.

(From *Embers* by Richard Wagamese. 2016. p.120)

I would like to spend the next hour with you imagining a better world, a world in which bodily autonomy is experienced by every woman, every person. A world in which there would be no violence against women, no rape, abuse, or killing just because we are women, a world in which we would be recognized for our intellect and beauty, and have opportunity to experience our full potential.

The stimulus for today's presentation of *The Imaginary* comes from a project following my retirement from the University of Alberta. The project began with discussions with Susan Andrews Grace (writer, poet, and visual artist) during our breakfasts at the Hume Hotel in Nelson, British Columbia. Susan and I delved into conversations about philosophy and creativity, women's lives, marriage and children, and our political, literary, and ethical world.

One morning early in our time together, as we sipped our dark coffee and waited for our breakfast to arrive, I said to Susan,

"On my drive to town this morning I heard on the CBC news about yet another woman killed. A woman like us, just like us, out for a run in Vancouver's Stanley Park at the end of her workday." I shivered. I knew about long distance running.

"Another one, eh," Susan sighed sounding almost indifferent. I knew that she wasn't indifferent at all, for we had grappled with the reality of the raped, murdered, and missing women around the world and in Canada: the Montreal Massacre, the Highway of Tears, Vancouver's Eastside, Murdered and Missing Indigenous Woman. We both knew that such violence occurs too often, too commonly.



Back in 2007, the United Nations Secretary General said that most societies prohibit such violence—yet the reality is that too often it is covered up or tacitly condoned. That is still true. Still true in Canada with recent headlines *Hockey Canada moved cash from fund used for sexual assault claims to avoid encouraging more claims* (CBC News. October 21, 2022). Sounds like a business contract condoning or ignoring the sexual assault of women within Hockey Canada.

More than half of all the women on this earth are subjected to daily violence, said the Canadian writer Sally Armstrong in 2015. And she asked how did women become second-class citizens in the first place? Why is it that the international community still excuses the abuse of women and denies them equality rights in the name of culture and religion?

The meetings with Susan came to have serious intent, like a think tank of sorts. More like a basket than a tank, our discussions were not to influence government policy, were not about war, or power, or law but about the nurturing nature of love. What if OLD WOMAN is right, and love is the most important thing we can give each other?

In her philosophy class, Susan had read Plato's *Symposium*, a philosophical dialogue on the nature of love written around 385 BCE. This *Symposium* took the form of speeches—competitive speeches—given by a group of men held at a house in Athens. Women were not present and although Socrates delivered the ideas and wisdom of one woman, her ideas were filtered through his male mind: Diotima did not speak for herself.



Susan and I wondered. What influence, if any, did Plato's *Symposium*—as a foundational text for Western philosophy—have on attitudes of love and the relationship between men and women in today's society? To broaden an understanding of our own culture's approach to love we decided to reconvene a symposium, with women, on the nature of love. We used Plato's *Symposium* as inspiration.

We reconvened Plato's *Symposium* four times: in Castlegar, British Columbia with six women; in an Edmonton, Alberta home with eight women; in Camrose, Alberta with nine women; and, on Galiano Island, British Columbia with seven. These thirty women (artists, farmers, teachers, carpenters, gardeners, lawyers, professors, philosophers, some were mothers, yes, even grandmothers) were invited to spend a day together. No preparation was necessary.

The women, wise, intelligent and open-minded, were simply asked to read Plato's text together, out loud, all in one setting (each woman taking an equal part, laughing as we stumbled on the Greek names). After the reading and lunch, the women discussed the way love was presented by Plato's speeches and explored what was missing from their point of view. It was not an academic exercise of what Plato's *Symposium* meant when it was written but rather helped women contemplate what a fuller idea of love could mean in our culture now: a concept of love that strives to hear different voices.

The days of discussion on the nature of love were filled with energy and enthusiasm. The ideas that the women talked about were love as compassion; the fluid nature of love, like the blood of life; love's pain and sorrow, especially in our connections to childbirth and care of children; love in relationship and in a respectful community. They talked of love as desire and beauty. They agreed that love and beauty have no room for violence.

In writing *The Imaginary* I was prompted first by what the women talked about, but then the writing got away from me as more and more ideas crept in from other sources, other research and literature, even from the news and films. I also reflected on personal experiences of violence. *The Imaginary* continues to evolve as a living document: There is no final conclusion.

Violence against women is tough, and some of the real life stories I used are tough, and may trigger traumatic memories for both readers and listeners.

I wonder if a discussion of love can have any place in helping to understand and prevent violence against women? *Something has to.* Perhaps an attitude of cultural love in society can open one to be respectful not only of women, but of people of different religions, gender, race, and people with different ways of living. And what about the violator? Let's listen to the women. I wonder what they will say.

Prologue

The Imaginary is a dialogue between Goddesses sharing the ideas of love—not speaking for women, but rather as them. These Goddesses have been alive in the human imagination for thousands of years, showing women how to acquire self-knowledge and authentic autonomy. While the Goddesses chosen for this narrative carry the names of their mythological ancestors, in this rendition they are thoroughly modern and mortal. The Goddesses characterize various aspects of real women's lives. Their talk is both serious and light-hearted.

The Goddesses gather on this auspicious occasion to share their wisdom of love. Let us imagine them in their outfits and accoutrements, perhaps sitting around a small buffet laid out with crusty bread, green and black olives, humus, and even Norwegian lefse, as was enjoyed by the women who met in Camrose. Imagine them having a cup of coffee or tea, or sharing a flagon of bold Mediterranean wine (after all a symposium was a wine drinking party in Ancient Greece).



ATHENA: Goddess of great wisdom and intellect.

(Read by Margaret Shone)

HERA: Goddess of all aspects of women's life, marriage and family. (Read by Jenna Lakhani)

IRIS: Goddess of rainbows and communication. (Read by Sadie Deschenes)

APHRODITE: Goddess of beauty and pleasure. (Read by Diane Kunyk)

GAIA: Goddess of earth and harvest, the link between heaven and earth. (Read by Janine Chesworth)

FREYA: Norse Goddess associated with romantic love, lust, and beauty. (Read by Jesse Mackay)

ATHENA: I am Athena. As the Goddess of Wisdom you'd think I should know what love is, but it is hard to define. So I will speak in praise of my understanding of the experience of love as we have been asked to do.

Let me begin with a personal meaning of love. Love is a watery, flowing kind of energy between people, intuitively taking in the concepts of care and beauty. It is practical. It is about the world we live in. Such love is often punctuated by the calling out of children in another room, or a snowplough outside, loud and demanding, or other real life noises and traumas, such as loss of jobs, cancer, death of a child: Events of the real world. Love of this kind is fluid, continually shifting and moving with ups and downs. Such a love comes to you—constantly making and remaking.

HERA: I am Hera, the Goddess of Marriage and the Family. I say that love is fully in the body, is embodied. Bodily love is responsible for the fruits of the womb, the future of the babies. Love of this kind always has sorrow embedded; death is present and real, from birth and even before birth. Embodied love as experienced just gets bigger and bigger, with my child, with the neighbour's child, with the old man in the soup line, or the homeless young woman I meet on the street. It is soft and tender. Love takes its time to cook the meal, to make the bed, and clean the toilet. It is concrete, as part of daily life. This kind of love is not limited to women's experience but men experience it too, especially as more men are taking on their parenting role: fathering their own children.

IRIS: I am Iris the Goddess of Rainbows and Communication, reflected in the many colours of the eye, the many colours of the earth, ephemeral and constantly changing.

My song in praise of love is in the exchange between one and another. In such a love there would be talking and listening as in conversation, not just a rant, speech, or a lecture. Love is a give and take with another person different from oneself. In such a relationship difference is valued, whether masculine or feminine or lesbian or gay or him or her, or they or them, rich or poor, black, white or brown.

Rainbows that paint the sky after a rain or rainbows painted on our sidewalks remind us of love's inclusion.

HERA: Yet Goddess Iris, in our world today, physical relationships and domestic violence don't just occur with women but men too can be abused. Violence may also occur in same sex relationships between women and women, or men and men, and transgender relationships as well. But we know that men are by far the abusers.

IRIS: You are right, Goddess Hera. The symbol of the rainbow as inclusion could, I guess, include both love and violence.

HERA: Talk about love may differ between the sexes, and perhaps talk of love comes more easily with women. But a mutual understanding of love is something we could move toward, and I think we should talk more about love without hesitation so that love can flourish fully. I read about the researcher, Halldóra Gunnarsdóttir, of the University of Iceland, who reminded me of that. I think she is right.

IRIS: She also thinks that love should have a more academic presence, just like studies of anger. I agree with that too.

ATHENA: When I think of love, it is not a noun, a quantity to grasp. Instead, love is a verb, engagement. Love is action. With such love each person is present to speak for herself from her own depth, her authenticity, each voice as powerful and as 'right' as the next.

FREYA: Let me just say something else for a moment. I am Freya. As a Goddess I think about romantic love a lot. I am reminded that love makes itself known in many ways, in part as lust or desire.

APHRODITE: Okay, Goddess Freya, that is a big topic. I see you are eager to say more but let me say something first.

I am Aphrodite, I am the Goddess of Beauty, I want to praise love as beauty. Beauty is love: love is beauty.

Remember one of the homes where we met to read Plato's *Symposium*? Remember its beauty? Meeting in Maureen's house in Edmonton was inspiring to everyone present. Although Maureen was absent, having died of breast cancer the summer before, her values, her clear love of beauty, expression and exploration, made the space conducive and welcoming to our pondering of love. The context and place of our discussion cannot be overlooked. Nor can love's relationship to mortality be ignored. In Plato the men talked about mortality in terms of fame, like getting a name on a building, whereas the women talked of death and mortality as loss and grief.

FREYA: Yet Goddess Aphrodite, beauty is not just in our surroundings, it is in our bodies. How many of us have never loved our own bodies? Fat belly, too big or too small boobs, and hair growing in the wrong places and oh those wrinkles! I think the world would change if women, in fact, all people, could love their own bodies, and never waste time wanting to be perfect or what others think perfect. Don't you agree?

APHRODITE: To love our own bodies, with their imperfections, would be the best. Then we would have true bodily autonomy. We would not doubt who we are: Beauty at its best.

FREYA: But I want to come back to talk of love as sexual pleasure, I wasn't quite finished. In fact I hadn't even started.

I noticed, Goddess Athena, when you talked in praise of love it had the same flow and passion we hear from those who talk of pleasure, shared sexual pleasure. Mutual pleasure—love and desire's profound

experience—sexual love is not often talked about. So I want to talk about it.

HERA: Good for you, Freya. Go for it.

FREYA: Lustful desire experienced between one and another, men or women, lesbian, gay, and all other fluid sexual arrangements, or even with oneself, is felt through the touch of the body, in the crease of the elbow, the elegant curves of the neck, or yearnings triggered by long graceful straight legs, and offers pleasures that can be felt in no other way.

So enjoyable: So pleasurable: One of the joys of human life. But. But it also can turn into trauma.

IRIS: I just now read a recent book by Sarah Polley who gave these facts: She was 16, Jian Ghomeshi was 28. He asked her out on a date, they ended up in his apartment, she was nervous, he had his hands around her neck, she wanted him to stop, she clearly expressed that she wanted him to stop, and he did finally stop but only after he had hurt her. She was hurt. She took a cab to her brother's place and told him. And then she pushed it out of her mind. She did not want to remember how bad it was, but her brother, he knew. Sarah did not tell the police, she said.

Jian was charged by other women, went to court, and was acquitted.

Sarah said she couldn't join the other women in court, as she had two children and she knew the experience in court would destroy her.

FREYA: Oh my, dear Iris. How awful! So while we are made for sexual pleasures, to be intimate with one another, to express life and love, such experiences can also led to dissociation and lasting trauma. Consent has to be willingly clear.

IRIS: Still there is abuse. There is no love there.

APHRODITE: Love as desire loosens one, causes waves of feeling and fluids to flow in and out of the body, often leaving one breathless and saturated. One gets to know oneself, be true to oneself. Bodily autonomy.

One feels beautiful. Oh beauty. What we need is beauty.

IRIS: Still dreadful things happen.

HERA: Sexual feelings and interests start in the young, and wax and wane, and wax again, long into the lives of the old.

GAIA: As Gaia, Goddess of the Earth, I think of how the phases of the moon wax and wane too. At times sensual love is like the vibrant full moon, and sometimes it is like the calm of the new moon: a calm in the midst of brilliant stars.

HERA: I want to be clear. Love, as sexual pleasure given and taken between people, can only occur with permission. On-going consent is an invitation that, if accepted, heightens continued involvement, but if not accepted, means "no." No means no.

Women and girls belong to themselves, as does each person. Women are autonomous. Women and their partners choose with whom and when sexual activity occurs.

FREYA: And here is another *but*. But women and girls (girls in high school for example) are accused of wearing the wrong clothes, the too-short skirts, or the revealing bathing suits (they are very skimpy!). At the same time as girls are developing their natural growth as sexual beings, the gaze of men quickly makes them uncomfortable, makes them into sexual objects.

I worry about that for my own daughter.

IRIS: Men and boys seem to forget that the girls are not there for them. Men seem to forget that girls and women belong to themselves, and are not made to be fuel for their own fantasies.

APHRODITE: Either too skimpy or even fully covered, the clothing of girls and women gets talked about. Women get accused of wearing the wrong clothes. Think of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, the Iranian woman arrested for not wearing the hijab properly, and who was ultimately killed.

Whether women and girls are covered or not covered, clothes are not the issue.

IRIS: Being a slut or saint is in the eye of the person looking: In the eye of the beholder.

APHRODITE: Surely, girls and women should be able to wear what they want: Bodily autonomy in its finest dress.

FREYA: Sex education for boys, often from pornography and misinformed friends, teaches boys to associate sexual pleasure with dominance and to shut down tender feelings. Such education leads to toxic masculinity, a major problem for men and boys. No wonder I worry about my boy too.

For girls such a toxic culture conflates sexuality with subservience.

ATHENA: I just read in *The Economist*—of all places—that we should change the way that children learn about sex. Instead of focussing on problems, we should encourage discussion of its pleasure, its ecstasy and happiness. And also teach about how to talk to a partner about ‘enthusiastic’ consent: how to communicate with each other—opposite sex or same sex, no difference.

FREYA: Yea for *The Economist*.

Educating even younger children also needs priority during the time when children develop the moral compass for their lives. Think of all the boys and the girls who are avid talented hockey players, like Vangie’s nine-year-old grandson. The rink is a perfect place and time to teach fairness and respect for oneself and each other. To learn compassion too. *Hockey Canada* could learn from the kids and create a healthy hockey culture where abuse is not anticipated nor tolerated.

IRIS: And I heard about the English high school girls who started a petition to have girls’ school uniforms banned from use in pornography sites or sold in sex shops. Smart girls. They know where the trouble lies, and it is not with themselves and what they wear.

FREYA: Yea for those girls too.

GAIA: Speaking as the goddess of the earth and the link between heaven and earth, I wonder about

the effect of sexual love in the world of religion and history. Scriptures denigrate women. Think about the many thinkers from the European Christian tradition, such as Augustine, or Apostle Paul, or Martin Luther who claimed that lustful desires were the source of original sin. Even though now many of us do not hold to notions of original sin, religious dogmas are pernicious., have a harmful effect in gradual or subtle ways: especially in the blame of women for seduction.

All religions have at their core the will to control and dominate women’s sexuality and reproduction while elevating men’s dominion over women, said Sally Armstrong in her book *Ascent of Women*. The consequences have been deadly.

ATHENA: It is said that some men, like Augustine, wanted to be pure but could not help experiencing lust; he wanted to be good but could not resist the temptation to behave badly. Being tempted is a fact of being human, isn’t it, so we need to develop awareness of that part in all of us.

IRIS: But sometimes we say ‘boys will be boys’. Justifying abusive and aggressive behaviour in men as natural, rather than as learned.

There can be no love for those who abuse and harm, can there? I think we have to remember that.

ATHENA: Other religions have similar fears of women’s so-called seductive wiles, and we have already talked of examples. Marriage has been used for years to sanction sexual activities and desire, a sacrament controlled by the church, and other patriarchal institutions.

HERA: Remember I am the Goddess of Marriage and Family. Marriage is an important public commitment of love. Indeed, same-sex marriage and different-sex marriage are legal in Canada.

Yet here too all is not well. Marriage is not always a harbour of emotional and sexual happiness given the unbounded amount of domestic abuse present in today’s society. When there is inequality between partners, then marriage can be a threat to autonomy and consent.

ATHENA: Sometimes I get tired. Tired, so tired, and don't want to read any more about all the wrongs, our wrongs, done to so many in our country. So many women and children, and some men, too, have been violated by sexual abuse, so many people abused and killed by racism. It is overwhelming. It is so hard to deal with it. It exhausts me.

But then I say to myself, no. No. I cannot stop reading and listening, dear friends. I *do* want to remember, must remember the women that we know, and the ones we don't know, who have been raped, abused and gone missing.

HERA: I think of the paper by Lois Sweet, who recently wrote that she could be 'silent no more'. She described how her family's doctor raped her when she was 19 after she had had an appendectomy. She wrote:

I lay on the cold, hard table and waited. And waited. Finally, he entered the room. He immediately began pulling out the stitches. It took only moments so I thought he was finished.

Instead, he took off his white doctor's coat, undid his pants, then stepped out of them and his underwear. He climbed on top of me, his penis hard and elongated, yanked my panties down and entered me.

He spoke not a word and I made not a sound. In fact, I didn't even move. I simply lay there in his clinic room, pinned down and helpless. I could barely breathe.

Lois carried this experience—which I know has happened to many women—for almost fifty years before she shared it. What does one's body remember, even if the woman does not consciously remember herself? Harms like that don't just go away, they leave a mark.

IRIS: Lois says it has to do with power, men's power over women. And it is, and it makes her angry. It makes me angry. So angry. The status quo, the patriarchs, the misogynists, the colonizers, the abusers are very powerful. Too powerful. Where is the love there?

GAIA: How important it was for Lois to tell her story, even 50 years later. Such difficult stories: stories of real people. The stories we must hear and remember. The 'Me too' movement, now 5 years on, has proven that again and again. Me too, women say, it happened to me too.

FREYA: It is increasingly confounding to me that a woman who actively engages in sex with someone and then is violated during that encounter and clearly says 'no,' is doubly brutalized after deciding to report to the police.

IRIS: Yes, in Sarah Polley's book one woman said that the bulk of her rape trauma was not the sexual assault itself but of 'the brutality of the legal system'. Something is terribly wrong.

HERA: Oh we know something is terribly wrong. The red dresses hanging in the trees in my neighbourhood remind me again and again that something is terribly wrong. The impact of the killing and abuse of women is carried in the body life-long, through generations even. Seven generations.

ATHENA: Generations. Vangie personally understands that, she told me. Her grandmother and two aunts were killed before she was born. That's why she wrote the story about her family's tragedy, so that others in her family don't have to wonder what happened. So that her granddaughter will not have to explore the trauma again, to write about it, to help put a stop to the generational trauma.

IRIS: Sometimes I have to breathe deep and slow to calm my shaking heart so I can continue to listen to these stories of pain. The onus is on me to speak my truth, to expose the reality of our everyday experiences. Then I—all of us—have to breathe, deep and slow to listen to and feel women's pain. I have to listen to women's experiences, and share my own.

ATHENA: Yet we can never really know the truth of another, can we? No one can truly know the heart of another: meanings quiver, are changeable, not fixed. But I have to, want to, listen to women's stories of their trauma, and also listen to the stories of families, even generations later. Is that love? Is that love in

action? Love as a verb? Love to those who have been traumatized?

HERA: Listening is the route to empathy. Yes, you are right, Athena, I want to listen to the stories. But I cannot assume that I know what it was fully like for the storyteller.

APHRODITE: Change can happen. Change is in the making, the making of stories. Richard Wagamese reminds us to listen to stories with our heads, hear with our hearts, and feel with our spirits. That sounds like love.

GAIA: A new Imaginary could focus on changing the way men and women engage. Could listening to women's (and men's) experience of violence, put a stop to it? And educate young men and women to express their love and desire in ways that would respect difference, respect independence and respect relational and continuous consent?

IRIS: This exploration of love is fascinating. I am intrigued. But can love *really* be a route to stopping violence against women? I want to get real here. Aren't we venturing into La-La land? The only way for me to live in love is to become familiar with my own dark side (my anger and hate) and to engage with and integrate it.

HERA: You are right Iris. I think violence is so prevalent because violators seek meaning in destruction. They must feel momentarily empowered when bullying, demeaning, assualting, raping, kidnapping, torturing, killing, or else they wouldn't do it.

Love alone won't turn the tide. But perhaps hand-in-hand with sound social policy, appropriate law, and culture that supports equality for all, genuine change can occur. Yet love is essential.

FREYA: Our interconnections, our love for each other defines us as a community. It is love for each other that is necessary, for who you are, and how you live your life. Such love is dynamic and multifaceted, not just selfish where one only thinks of oneself but love by its very nature includes the other. I think that the opposite of selfishness is not selflessness or altruism

but community. Love is experienced as communion. The price of love is equality and respect for each other.

ATHENA: Love as community. One of the things that puzzle me is the question of love for those who harm others. Iris, what do you think? We all make mistakes, we all do wrong. Does that mean we should not be loved?

IRIS: It seems impossible to have love for those who have done such terrible things. Yet perhaps that is really the nugget, the preciousness of love? A broad love that nurtures empathy and develops our community and institutional culture where acts of violence are not tacitly condoned or covered up. I need to think more about that.

HERA: Remember Wagamese's OLD WOMAN who said that love is "you leading me back to the highest possible version of myself and me leading you back to who you were created to be". Seems like we need love of myself and love of each other, no matter what. There is hope there.

GAIA: Being tied to the earth my last song is in praise of my love for trees. Trees tell of love that is bigger than me. A tall straight tree seems a perfect example of bodily autonomy. Alone and separate. But is it? Scientists are finding that even the individual tree is communal. Trees share resources, like water, and send out warning signals to other trees when needed. The trees care for one another, through chemical and electrical impulses: 'A web of interconnectedness'.

You know, I want to be like a tree. Be a birch. Be a maple. Be a larch. I want to raise children as tall beautiful trees who are in touch with their feelings, authentically empowered to express them, to think for themselves, to make choices, and to say yes or say no. I also want to raise children who treasure the connection to others, to engage with and love others.

ATHENA: Oh good, Gaia. I am glad you brought us back to the wisdom of our natural world. For the reminder that while we are strong, independent, and autonomous, we are also tied to each other and the earth through a societal (political) interconnectedness of care for each other.

Epilogue

The Goddesses gathered at this meeting to share praise of love, as well as tell tough stories of violence against women. Something has to stop the violence. Could it be love? Could an attitude of cultural love open one to treat women, everyone, with respect and loving-kindness? Can we imagine that love really could change the world? Love's nature is one of continuing the question: a living question of making and giving love.



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Acknowledgements

I thank Michael van Manen and the Dossetor Centre for the chance to speak at the Dossetor Health Ethics Symposium on "Bodily Autonomy". I never expected to have one more such opportunity. It was a privilege.

Susan Andrews Grace collaborated with and inspired me for many years. Together we reconvened Plato's *Symposium* with four groups of women: The thirty women spent an eventful day speaking in praise of love. I am grateful to Susan and for the women's enthusiastic participation.

Seven women (speakers/goddesses) read *The Imaginary* on November 25, 2022. Wendy Austin (Prologue/Epilogue), Janine Chesworth (Gaia), Sadie Deschenes (Iris), Diane Kunyk (Aphrodite), Jenna Lakhani (Hera), Jesse Mackay (Freya), and Margaret Shone (Athena). It was such a blessing to have their energetic voices.

Eunice Scarfe, Lois Sweet, and Jeannie Martin read a draft of *The Imaginary* and gave important suggestions and ideas (even words). Thank you.

Brault Kelpin, whose on-going collaboration is for me an expression of love as a verb. His patient editing was essential to the process, as were the long conversations and the deep enduring love we have for each.

Health Ethics Today

Editor • Michael van Manen
Assistant Editor • Carol Nahorniak
Distribution • Carol Nahorniak
Layout • Carol Nahorniak

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