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J. Y. Lee

University of Copenhagen

ji.young.lee@sund.ku.dk

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Abstract

Natalie Stoljar posits that those who have internalized oppressive norms lack *normative competence*, which requires true beliefs and critical reflection. A lack of normative competence makes agents nonautonomous, according to Stoljar. This framework is thereby meant to address what she calls the “feminist intuition”—the intuition that oppressive norms are incompatible with autonomy. On my view, however, Stoljar’s normative competence account of autonomy is subject to a worrying problem. Her account misattributes nonautonomy to those who *perpetrate* the oppression, making those who are oppressed and those who oppress count as equally nonautonomous. I argue that this is implausible and demonstrate in this paper that we can establish an *asymmetry* of autonomy between those who oppress others and those who are made the target of oppression.

Keywords: autonomy, normative competence, oppression, feminist philosophy

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that there is an *asymmetry of autonomy* between those who are oppressed and those who perpetrate the oppression. My argument herein should be coherent if we can, as a minimum, grant that individual autonomy is *not* an asocial phenomenon but is rather one that captures an ongoing relationship between individual decision-making and the social contexts in which individual agents are embedded. With this in mind, I would posit that the differences in the social standing between those who oppress and those who are oppressed spell out respectively different outcomes for the agents, which may then be tied to why there is an asymmetry of autonomy between them.

If my claim herein is plausible, I believe it poses a serious worry for Natalie Stoljar’s account of autonomy based on normative competence, which focuses primarily on the *internal* capacity to discern false and oppressive norms. In section 1 of this paper, I explicate Natalie Stoljar’s view, and I survey Elizabeth Sperry’s objection to Stoljar in section 2. According to Sperry’s objection, the normative competence theory is prone to mistakenly attribute nonautonomy to the oppressed. My own critique, which I lay out in section 3, is that the normative competence-based

approach can be worrisome for a different reason. Staking the determination of autonomy on an agent's exercise of "normative competence" may capture why internalized oppression is detrimental to one's autonomy; yet, as I shall claim, this has the effect of misattributing nonautonomy to some of those who *oppress* others. To illustrate my point, I will make use of an example—the unregenerate macho male (MM)—drawn from Diana Meyers's work. I demonstrate that the MM is an example of an oppressor who lacks normative competence, due to his mistakenly inflated sense of self. As such, the MM would count as nonautonomous on Stoljar's account. However, in section 4 I will substantiate the claim that there is an asymmetry of autonomy between agents who perpetuate oppression and agents who receive it. In section 5, I anticipate and address potential objections to my view. I conclude the paper by conveying that Stoljar's view misses out on the importance of identifying this asymmetry of autonomy.

1. Normative Competence and the Feminist Intuition

Personal autonomy very broadly refers to the idea of living in accordance with one's self-determined, self-governed choices. In contemporary philosophical literature, this has been cashed out in a couple of ways. Those who endorse what are called *proceduralist* notions of autonomy claim that autonomy is achieved if agents *form* their preferences in appropriate ways—through certain kinds of critical reflection, for example, or via the exercise of "minimal rationality" (Schwartz 2005, 444).¹ Procedural theories are, incidentally, "content-neutral" (Mackenzie 2008, 519); the procedure of one's preference-formation is relevant, but the *content* of one's preferences is not. Autonomous preferences under this account can include diverse sorts of values and norms.

On the other hand, *substantivist* theorists of autonomy cast procedural views into doubt by claiming that the content of an agent's decision-making inputs *matter*. Natalie Stoljar, for instance, is a substantivist who argues that the procedural

¹ Andrew Schwartz (2005, 444) describes minimal rationality as requiring that "preferences be transitively ordered and that any beliefs underlying these preferences be consistent with each other." The value-neutral implication here is clear: agents can more or less have autonomous preferences about anything—minimal rationality need not meet standards of external rationality. To put it another way, what it means for an autonomy theory to be content neutral is that "there are no *a priori* constraints on the content of the desires or values that might motivate autonomous action" (Kristinsson 2000, 257). Such accounts broadly follow in the Frankfurtian/Dworkinian tradition of autonomy, by which autonomy is said to be a "second-order capacity of persons to critically reflect upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes, and so forth" (Dworkin 2015, 14).

approach is in fact undesirable from a feminist perspective. Her objection is that it is unable to capture what she calls the “feminist intuition,” which is the idea that “preferences influenced by oppressive norms of femininity cannot be autonomous” (Stoljar 2000, 94). I am overall sympathetic to this view that a theory of autonomy requires greater analysis of the social circumstances and contexts against which decision-making is carried out, *besides* simply the agent’s motivational structures. Because what the agent determines for themselves is negotiated within a social context, it is imperative that we be attentive to the kinds of social conditions laid out within them which may have both enabling and disabling effects on individual agency. I have some reservations, however, about Natalie Stoljar’s rendition of substantive autonomy, which I will elaborate on throughout this paper.

To flesh out the idea that preferences influenced by false and oppressive norms cannot be autonomous, Stoljar considers a study of contraceptive risk-takers (CRs) detailed in Kristin Luker’s book, *Taking Chances*. The task of Luker’s study was to find out why women who have free access to different methods of contraception end up having unwanted pregnancies and getting elective abortions thereafter. The women in the study did not become pregnant due to ignorance, lack of skills, or access to contraception (Stoljar 2000, 95). Luker’s aim was to anticipate and challenge the claim that these women are irrational subjects. According to Luker, these women behaved rationally, having bargained with themselves over the costs and benefits of contraceptive use and ultimately deciding to take the risk.

Some of the norms cited from interviews with Luker’s subjects included the following: it is inappropriate for women to have active sex lives, it is unseemly for women to plan for and initiate sex, it is wrong to engage in premarital sex, pregnancy and childbearing promote one’s worthiness as a woman, it is normal for women to bargain for their marriage by proving their fertility to their partners or their partners’ families, and women are worthwhile marriage partners only if they are capable of childbearing (Stoljar 2000, 99). Although Luker’s vindication of her subjects takes place within the context of rational choice theory, Stoljar takes the example to correspond to discussion about personal autonomy. Stoljar’s claim is that Luker’s subjects do in fact trigger the feminist intuition because they are motivated by “oppressive and misguided norms that are internalized as a result of feminine socialization” (97). To put it another way, these norms appear to have “criticizable contents,” which include norms of religion, femininity, and sexuality oppressive to women (100).

Stoljar’s perspective is that there is something about the internalization of these sorts of norms that is detrimental to agents’ autonomy. Yet it seems Luker’s subjects would pass the various tests for procedural autonomy, including *counterfactual conditions*, *internal coherence*, *endorsement*, *self-knowledge*, and

inhibiting factors.² As a result, Luker's subjects cannot be ruled as nonautonomous on a purely procedural basis. The dilemma here is that even if Luker's CRs are *procedurally* autonomous, it does little to assuage our concern that decision-making that has a basis in oppressive norms is at the very least problematic, if not nonautonomous.

Stoljar claims, instead, that a strongly substantive theory of autonomy³ will help explain this feminist intuition. She observes, "Women who accept the norm that pregnancy and motherhood increase their worthiness accept something *false*. And because of the internalization of the norm, they do not have the capacity to perceive it as false" (Stoljar 2000, 108). We can account for this problem, says Stoljar, with the idea that "normative competence" denotes autonomy. Normative competence is a skill that requires true beliefs and the ability to reflect critically on one's decisions. If *this* is the basis of autonomy, it is clear why Luker's CRs' choices evoke the feminist intuition: the subjects lack normative competence and are thereby nonautonomous.

2. Sperry's Critique: A Misattribution of Nonautonomy

Even if we take for granted that the feminist intuition is legitimate, we might question whether Stoljar's test case here actually raises the feminist intuition. Elizabeth Sperry, for instance, has said that strongly substantive autonomy—of which Stoljar's view is a type—"tends to attribute heteronomy to the oppressed without sufficient investigation" (Sperry 2013, 888). Sperry believes Stoljar uses language that conflates internal bargaining with "deformed" desires, and external bargaining with "social expectations the agent cannot change" (896). In the example of Luker's CRs, Sperry says we have two interpretations open to us: on one interpretation, the CRs took the contraceptive risk because they were motivated by norms of fertility aimed at promoting their worthiness as "real women." But on a different interpretation, we might say, "Luker's interviewees knew their potential mates would consider them 'real women' only if they proved their fertility. A marriage-seeking woman—and in the 1960s women had powerful economic and social reasons to seek marriage—had to contend with men's values" (896). The point here is that it is possible for women to make these difficult choices without necessarily having internalized their own oppression, contrary to Stoljar's picture. Furthermore, Sperry mentions that some of Luker's women "describe themselves in terms that reveal only the functioning of risk-

² I do not go into detail about all these possible procedural conditions. What Stoljar argues in her work is that for each one of these conditions, Luker's subjects *would* satisfy them. I assume this is true.

³ Proponents of strongly substantive autonomy, as explained by Sonya Charles (2010, 411), are distinguished from content-neutral theories of autonomy by the requirement of specific "nonsubjective or 'external' criteria."

oriented personalities” (892). For example, one of the interviewees talked about how she stopped using contraception because the burden of responsibility kept her from enjoying sex. Sperry characterizes this as “a protest against, rather than a capitulation to, deformed desires” (892). So while *some* of Luker’s CRs may be acting on internalized oppression as per Stoljar’s analysis, it is certainly plausible that not all of them fit this mould.

Sperry touches on an important point here. Stoljar’s account appears uniformly restrictive about the autonomy of agents under oppression, since it fails to seriously consider the possibility that agents can be within oppressive structures *without* having internalized oppressive norms. As such, it may well be that Stoljar unfairly casts the CRs as lacking in normative competence by positing that their decision-making *necessarily* assimilates oppressive inputs. Be that as it may, Sperry clearly accepts that a modest number of Luker’s CRs may indeed be lacking in autonomy by lacking normative competence. So while Stoljar’s analysis may be prone to classify agents as nonautonomous without sufficient investigation, there is no reason Stoljar’s view should not be useful for problematizing those cases of agents who have “really” internalized their own oppression. Still, recent feminist literature on autonomy remains critical of such accounts, on the basis that they “import judgments about the value or truth of specific preferences” (Wenner 2020, 32) or because categorizing agents as nonautonomous might leave agents open to having their wills overridden, which might “[exacerbate] the effects of oppression on individuals” (Khader 2020, 503). These are valid worries, and I will anticipate and address them in my own discussion throughout this paper. For the next section, however, I will focus on a different critique of Stoljar’s normative competence framework, based on its difficulties making agentic distinctions between those who are oppressors and those who are oppressed.

3. Another Misattribution of Nonautonomy

In my view, the normative competence account is prone not only to misattribute nonautonomy to some agents under oppression but also to some agents who *perpetrate* the oppression. That is, the normative competence view fails to account for the asymmetry of autonomy between those who oppress and those under oppression. In this section, I will use Diana Meyer’s profile of the unregenerate macho male (MM) as a counterexample to Stoljar’s theory.

I now provide a brief overview of the context in which Diana Meyers discusses the macho male, and show how the example maps onto my own discussion about normative competence. Meyers helpfully distinguishes between two competing conceptions of self-respect. On one view—the *moral* view—self-respect is a kind of moral duty one has to oneself to maintain one’s own dignity. This would require one to resist attacks on one’s rights and to take it upon oneself to uphold standards of

moral conduct in one's behaviour. The moral view denies that self-respect can be excessive, unjustified, or undesirable. On the other view—*psychological* self-respect—self-respect is a matter of whether one does what one deems worthy of oneself. This view has “no special moral import” and is thereby compatible with immoral conduct (Meyers 1995, 218). On the psychological view, then, it *is* possible to inflate one's self-regard, *contra* the moral view. The difference between these two accounts is that the moral view would only count as respectable the “morally autonomous” self, whereas the psychological view would count *any* self as respect-worthy so long as that self meets one's *own* standard of respect-worthiness.

According to Meyers, the MM embodies an example of a merely *psychological* self-respect. The MM is expected to overpower his wife, in some cases beat her to remind her of her place, while being able to respect himself for this immoral conduct. On the moral view of self-respect, this type of self would be viewed as morally wanting, since it would deny that the proper object of self-respect is a “socially condoned self” (Meyers 1995, 230). Meyers's own view is that the macho male's failure to be self-respecting stems from the way he premises his self-respect on a “non-autonomously adopted and immoral role” (Meyers 1995, 230). She says this failure is marked by his blindness to the cruelty of his conduct, which is a result of acceptance of sexist social convention, and the fact that he aims his respect at this social convention rather than a “self-governing agent” (230).

Natalie Stoljar's account would provide us with a neat explanation here as to how the macho male's socialization atrophies his normative competence. The MM's blind adherence to social convention is the equivalent of having adopted a false norm and lacking the true beliefs required for normative competence. Moreover, by barring himself from recognizing the error of his ways, he foregoes the possibility of separating his “true self” from the socially condoned self that is violent to women through critical reflection. Thus, he lacks normative competence.

Yet to admit that he lacks normative competence—as per Stoljar's view—would be to admit that he is nonautonomous. I would argue that *this* step is the counterintuitive aspect of Stoljar's view. Those who do not see the equivalent nonautonomy of the oppressor and the oppressed as an issue for Stoljar's view might push back by denying that it is a problem that the MM also counts as nonautonomous. If the MM's socialization is such that he is blind to his social norms-governed conduct, why insist that he is different to someone like the contraceptive risk-taker, who is similarly socialized by gendered standards? In my view, we can insist on an asymmetry of autonomy by considering the extent of substantive and nontrivial differences between agents generated by social factors that intervene on what they are able to do. This implies, minimally, that internal capabilities such as normative competence are not the *only* relevant factors for determining an agent's autonomy, but that one's autonomy can *further* be impacted and shaped by one's social circumstances. As

Jason Chen observes, there are many wrongs and harms that might be pointed out as the negative effects of oppression, like social and political deprivation, and these are wrongs that unjustly affect the groups attributed to the “lower tier” in a hierarchical society (Chen 2017, 421). These unjust outcomes for the oppressed affect them in ways that would not affect those who are not in the “lower tier” of society. This appears to map on to the case of the MM and the CR, as being on the perpetuating or receiving end of oppression will place one in differentiated social standing. This is relevant for autonomy because, as I will explain in greater detail in section 4, such differences can radically shape and change an agent’s relative life prospects, what the agent is able to do or not do, what obligations the agent is expected to fulfil, and how the agent’s decisions are perceived by others. What makes somebody an autonomous *person* overall, rather than simply capable of having autonomous desires, involves how one is socially situated and enabled by and within one’s environment. *This* is why we should pay attention to social circumstances as the sites where one’s autonomy is negotiated.

What the normative competence paradigm misses out on, then, is the variability of social standing between the MM and CR. The MM possesses certain advantages conferred via his social standing, and the CR possesses certain disadvantages. Further, this variability of social standing gives us reason to treat the MM as comparatively more *liable* than the CR, on account of the fact that he is comparatively less nonautonomous. These are the differences worth highlighting that the normative competence model would be hard pressed to describe. Additionally, I believe my analysis would be able to circumvent some of the feminist concerns mentioned in section 2, regarding the risk of erasure or undue judgment of those under oppression. My next section, then, will be an endeavour to demonstrate in greater detail the reasons that make conceptualizing an asymmetry of autonomy entirely appropriate between the two cases.

4. An Asymmetry of Autonomy

In the previous section, I claimed that Stoljar’s normative competence view would misattribute nonautonomy to figures like the unregenerate macho male. I identified this issue as a serious worry for Stoljar’s view, since such a result precludes the possibility to meaningfully distinguish differences relevant to the autonomy of the contraceptive risk-taker and the macho male. In this section, I explain that the overarching difference of autonomous standing between the two cases issues from the fact that the CR and MM respectively occupy differential social standing. By social standing, I mean that agents are attributed a certain social status accompanied by certain behavioural constraints or enablements (Ásta 2019) in association with that status. That is, who one is taken to be socially plays a major role in what one is permitted or not permitted to do; it can be more costly or less costly for some agents

to make certain kinds of decisions relative to others. To show why this social differentiation is a plausible candidate for the asymmetry, I will overview different ways that we might link agents' social standing with their *autonomous* standing, relating the discussion throughout to the cases mentioned in the paper. My overview will primarily draw on several examples of critical feminist work, including Katharine Jenkins's theory of ontic injustice, Rebekah Johnston's externalist model of autonomy, and Serene Khader's insights on adaptive preferences. Taken together, these considerations should make a solid case for why we ought to treat the CR and MM as being asymmetrical in their autonomy, *contra* Stoljar's view.

Let us start out by considering Katharine Jenkins's idea of ontic injustice. Jenkins (2020, 188) claims that an agent can be wronged by their "being socially constructed as a member of a certain social kind"—this might include kinds such as "wife" or "black person." Being a certain social kind may involve subjection to certain social constraints and enablements (Jenkins 2020, 189) that involve certain social conferrals of status, or legally instituted permissions that play out within "[configurations] of power" (Hierro and Marquez 1994, 175). What Jenkins calls ontic injustice refers to the constraints and enablements that are constitutive of social kind membership—where sometimes these constraints and enablements might "[contravene] . . . the individual's moral entitlements" (Jenkins 2020, 190). The social constraints and enablements the agent is subjected to must be *wrongful* for them to suffer ontic injustice. She says that being subject to a "morally inappropriate" set of constraints and enablements in such a way that other agents might be *licensed* to treat one wrongfully will generate the risk that wrongful treatment will take place, alongside the attendant material and psychological harms (193). For example, marital rape exemption might plausibly put wives at risk both of being raped by their husbands or of suffering psychologically from the fears and anxieties attached to this. But whatever the actual outcome or consequence of this possibility, the wrong that takes place consists in the mere fact that one *is* a wife, where this consists of "being someone who is not entitled to control fully sexual access to one's body" (191). The aspect to take away here is the possibility that *who* one is—at least, who one is in terms of their membership as a certain social kind—matters much for the kinds of things one is able to *do* in the world, independently of one's luck or individual abilities like normative competence.

While Jenkins's discussion of ontic injustice does not directly reference autonomy, it is clear that it implicates individual agency, given the connection between being a member of a certain social kind and the attendant constraints and enablements that attach to certain social kinds. The reason why the MM and CR might be asymmetrical with respect to their autonomy may lie with the fact that—personal capacities to discern one's own socialization notwithstanding—the kinds of things they are expected to do and *can* do imply different outcomes. The different

constraints and enablements they have, which are in large part socially sanctioned and related to the social kind groups of which they are members, dictate that the MM and CR will have vastly different kinds of social experiences and life prospects. We might point towards the MM's ability to exercise a kind of power that consists in his ability to "constrain the choices available to another actor or set of actors in a nontrivial way" (Allen 1998, 33). If the kinds of permissions that the MM has consists in his having the power to overpower his wife without significant fear of social reprisal, whereas the CR experiences pressures to defer to her husband on matters to do with contraceptive control, we can plausibly mark out the CR's obviously *wrongful* subjection to oppressive contraceptive constraints and enablements in a way that does not apply in the case of the MM. The problem, then, is not simply that agents are blind or impervious to the objectionable qualities of oppressive gendered norms (an issue on which both the CR and MM are indeed at risk). Rather, it ought to worry us that *how* such gendered socialization manifests or takes effect depends on one's social position, and that it is more the latter that makes a difference for the agent's prospects.

Perhaps Rebekah Johnston's critique of damage model views of autonomy can bolster my suggestion herein. According to Johnston, the damage model of autonomy—which focuses on *internal* damage to autonomy (such as damage to an individual's normative competence, in Stoljar's case)—fails to consider constraints to autonomy that are the result of the fact that *others* are permitted to embody traits that *subjugate* people. She claims that the "implicit social permissibility" that allows for members of subordinated identities to be positioned as "harassable, expendable, and criminal" (Johnston 2017, 320) constitutes a threat to autonomy, because these members are ascribed a status "of being appropriately subjected to violent or violating interference" (323). This would be inconsistent with, for instance, Marina Oshana's (1998, 94) view that to enjoy being an autonomous person, it is necessary for one to be embedded in relations with others that allow one to pursue their goals and objectives in a socially and psychologically secure environment. What is important to analyse, then, is not the oppressed agent but the oppressive traits and qualities that "members of superordinate identities" are permitted to exhibit against certain target groups (Johnston 2017, 320). Though I would not, unlike Johnston, completely rule out the relevance of the internalized effects on oppressed persons' experiences, what I take away from this discussion is that *too much* focus on internal capacities can obscure the extent to which *other* people's wills—like oppressors whose wills are socially condoned in a society—can impact the quality and scope of life that the target agents lead.

This insight further draws out why it is plausible to view it as inappropriate to treat the CR and MM as symmetrically nonautonomous. Johnston shows that there is a distinction between the oppressor and the oppressed. The mechanism of damage

to autonomy, which is borne by those who are oppressed, does not primarily consist of the “internal” damage (although, as I’ve tried to point out, we need not rule *out* such mechanisms as engendering additional psychological hindrances like fear) as it is a problem generated by the fact that people are *permitted to* assume social identities that enforce the denigrating and demeaning treatment of others. We see here, then, that the sort of constraints and enablements people have in the social world can be relevantly marked out by whether one is on the receiving end of oppression or on the side of perpetuating oppression. As it so happens, the MM embodies the kind of “superordinate” identity Johnston has in mind, whereas the CR seems to occupy exactly the kind of position that make them prone to be made the target of bodily control or usurpation. While the MM is obviously *morally* objectionable in his actions, and while his being inculcated into a macho culture may not have been particularly good or helpful to him, Johnston’s focus on the skewed dynamics of power between the oppressor and the oppressed show us why it is really the one made the *target* of the oppression who is at greater risk. As Michelle Cieurria says, it is challenging to properly hold liable those wrongdoers who “contribute to and benefit from hierarchies of power” (Cieurria 2020, 1) when their wrongdoings are implicitly permitted in this sense and “exonerated by patriarchal scripts” (6). It is no doubt a moral problem that the MM is permitted to embody the macho role, but the fact that he has this *type* of power signals that society, unfortunately, protects and vindicates his social identity in ways unavailable to the CR, who is made *subordinate* to such power. This is another plausible social difference that ties into why the MM is less nonautonomous than the CR.

Finally, we might compare the contents of the sorts of norms that the CR and MM have respectively adopted, and consider whether the differences might not also be related to the social positions in which they find themselves. For example, according to Serene Khader (2012, 303), adaptive preferences are “preferences formed in response to unjust social arrangements that are incompatible with a person’s basic wellbeing.” She says that the kinds of preferences one is most likely to find as candidates for adaptive preferences are those that “seem complicit in perpetuating people’s oppression and deprivation that are held by oppressed and deprived people and were formed under conditions uncondusive to their flourishing” (Khader 2011, 46). It may be, then, that the *kinds* or *types* of norms people adopt in their decision-making correspond to, or reveal something about, one’s social position. This would also explain, in part, why the view that there is an asymmetry between the CR and MM is plausible. The kinds of preferences they have each adopted exhibit different qualities, providing us with a snapshot of the social standing they have in the world in which these preferences were formed. Khader herself is cautious not to identify adaptive preferences with procedural autonomy deficits, however, given that this may, for example, “[justify] inappropriate attitudes toward persons with

[adaptive preferences]” (Khader 2009, 185). As I mentioned in section 2, a critique of substantive views like Stoljar’s is that attributing nonautonomy to those whose preferences are shaped and negotiated within structures of oppression may in itself further entrench oppression. On my view, however, it is primarily the social placement of different groups of agents, in different roles and positions, that make *comparative* analyses of autonomous standing plausible.

My mention of adaptive preferences, then, is not intended to suggest that they automatically make agents nonautonomous, nor that they necessarily display distorted desires that are the result of internalized oppression. Rather, I only wish to highlight the phenomenon of preference-formation as a natural *response to* injustice, and the shaping of preferences in accordance with social conditions contrary to basic well-being. It seems that the CR is a more likely candidate for this phenomenon, given that the content of her preferences responds to, perhaps, some unjust demand that women defer their sexual or contraceptive decision-making. If preferences are at all connected to outside oppression in this way, then the actual *content* of the adopted norms—rather than only the agent’s abilities to discern them as false—is worth paying attention to, since their content can reveal the different consequences agents face on account of their being (or not being) in a certain social position. So, *whatever* the CR’s choices indicate about their psychological state, the fact that they are placed in a position whereby they need to engage these difficult decision-making paradigms in the first place (i.e., to regard whether they should or should not defer contraceptive decision-making to their husbands) suggests to us that the social structures in place *enable* this sort of subjection. This makes the CR relatively less autonomous.

The kinds of things the MM abides by and seems to have internalized, on the other hand, are not “deprivation-perpetuating” (Khader 2011, 47) preferences in the relevant sense, because he is not the agent who is made the target of injustice or oppression: the contents of *his* internalization show us that he is in fact (advertently or inadvertently) on the perpetuating rather than receiving side of gendered oppression. Again, irrespective of the psychological states he holds in making these choices, it is telling that the *content* of the decisions he grapples with (i.e., to beat one’s wife or to not beat one’s wife) does not involve subjecting *himself* to dilemmas involving deferent or subservient roles. He is certainly wrong to act on such injustice-perpetuating socialization, of course, but given the socially condoned license he has to do what he will to his wife, he appears comparatively less nonautonomous than one who abides by disempowering gendered norms that are comparatively more harmful or damaging to oneself.

Thus, although the CR and the MM both exhibit failings to do with *discerning* the falsity of oppressive decision-making inputs, hopefully this overview has demonstrated that specificities of one’s social standing generate significant rifts between agents who occupy *different* social positions. Such differences are plausibly

sensitive to autonomy levels, given that we've observed they impact the agent's life prospects, what the agent is able to do, what obligations the agent is expected to fulfil, and how the agent's decisions are perceived by others. I will now explain more precisely how the differentiated social positions of the MM and CR cumulatively can generate a nontrivial asymmetry of autonomy despite the commonality between them, like the lack of normative competence.

The overarching nontrivial, nonarbitrary distinction between the CR and MM is that the MM appears to be comparatively advantaged socially—or at least less disadvantaged—than the CR. One way to flesh this out might be in terms of the *costliness* involved for either party when it comes to conforming to or rejecting gendered social norms, which implicates what the agents are able or unable to do in their lives. As Anca Gheaus (2011, 9) pointed out, the issue with a majority of gendered norms is that “they make it more costly for women than for men to obtain certain valuable things . . . and the social recognition that comes with them.” The CR may face significant social repercussions for deviating from contraceptive deference: her contraceptive use may be treated as evidence that she is sleeping around, for example, which would negatively affect her marriage prospects. As such, her pursuit of a life wherein she has greater reproductive control over her body—which seems obviously imperative for a good life—is extremely costly, given the social consequences of opting out of these norms. By contrast, if the MM decides not to beat his wife, he may face social disapproval or be seen as “too soft,” but comparatively speaking, he would face fewer costs for rejecting the social norms. Of course, there may be exceptions to these cases; but for our purposes it seems sufficient to establish that *on average*, we can expect the CR to face more agency-restricting sanctions as a result of her gendered social standing, whereas with the MM, we can expect less.

I hope this point at least partially motivates the claim that attributing nonautonomy to the MM in just the same way as is done for the CR would be an error. By focusing primarily on differential external pressures imposed on either party, which generate differentiated costs for conforming to or rejecting gendered social norms, I have shown that it is comparatively more costly for the CR to opt out of certain decisions. This avoids attracting the charge that sketching out an asymmetry of autonomy should involve making perfectionistic value judgments or invoking unacceptably paternalistic assessments of agents' supposed internalized oppression. Instead, we can treat the differentiated, gendered expectations and treatment of agents as leading to greater or lesser costs for certain decision-making routes. This enables us to delineate why agents who are the target of oppression suffer greater autonomy deficits.

Following this nontrivial and nonarbitrary distinction, I want to point out that the comparative *liability* the MM has for the kinds of norms he abides by further sets

him apart from the CR. This is because the content of his norms is not only morally undesirable but perpetuates injustice to others from a relatively more autonomous position. The liability of the MM seems to issue from the fact that he has a certain level of power and freedom—on account of his social standing—that he misuses or abuses in a manner that is lacking on the CR’s reproductive decision-making deferral. As stated in above paragraphs, it would be relatively less costly on average for the MM to opt out of the harmful social norms that dictate that his masculinity ought to be expressed via domestic violence; by failing to do so, he appears more blameworthy for his decisions.

I should note here, however, that some may be tempted to partially exonerate the MM on account of his ignorance. For instance, Susan Wolf (2013, 290) has explained that we might attribute lesser responsibility to agents who act badly but act in ways “strongly encouraged by their societies,” like slaveowners, Nazis, male chauvinists. She says that we would not blame agents for the actions that transpire from values that they could not help but mistakenly adopt (290). This line of thought appears to vindicate the responsibility of someone like the MM. It would, also, vindicate the CR, on account of the gendered norms that they could not but help be socialized into. But here, I would go beyond questions of the *attributability* of responsibility, and claim rather that the MM is someone we *ought* to hold liable to penalization and reprobation anyway, on account of the comparatively greater autonomy he has by virtue of the greater scope of choices he could have made and the allowances afforded him in his social sphere.

Of course, there is the option to just hold the MM liable for his bad actions *independently* of his autonomous status. Yet such a view would be lacking in a richer analysis of the agent’s social role and positioning. It appears to me that the asymmetry of autonomy would align with an asymmetry of liability. Even though we might partially exonerate from blame *both* the CRs and MMs on account of their blind spots, it seems that we have political reasons to find the MMs *answerable* for their decision-making errors, based on their social position. It appears appropriate to call on them to rectify their wrongs and to compensate for the harms incurred (notwithstanding additional structural shifts or collective responsibilities that may be required of society as well). It is unclear, however, how normatively productive it would be to hold the CRs *liable* in the same way—whether or not we find their choices worthy of critique more generally—given that it would be potentially victim-blaming to do so in light of their relatively disadvantaged social positioning.

5. Normative Competence, Autonomy, and Oppression

Natalie Stoljar’s account appeared to offer us a way to problematize the force of oppression as a legitimate input of someone’s autonomy. I have argued, however, that her feminist-minded account of normative competence did not adequately

address a possible downside: the risk of inappropriate *homogenization* of nonautonomy in the oppressor and the oppressed, on account of their equal subjection to objectionable gendered socialization. I hope that, by outlining some ways that we might detect an asymmetry of autonomy in the two key case studies observed herein—the contraceptive risk-taker and the macho male—I have demonstrated why it would be important for any autonomy to acknowledge not only the ways that the social oppression may hamper the autonomy of the oppressed but *also* the fact that we should disambiguate between the oppressor and the oppressed.

In this final section, I will anticipate and address some potential objections that might be levelled at my view and then endeavour to ward off such concerns. One objection might be that my discussion enforces an artificial dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed, failing to be sensitive to mixed or ambiguous cases. For instance, an agent we treat as an oppressor in a gendered-hierarchical society may in fact be oppressed in other ways—for instance, on the basis of their race, disability status, or sexual orientation. Such ambiguities would also apply in the case of those with membership in an oppressed group. However, I would say that these harder cases do not detract from the applicability of my view to the limited cases I have considered here. Additionally, my view does not preclude the possibility that autonomy is a dynamic phenomenon in the social sphere. I clarify herein that it should be perfectly acceptable on my account to acknowledge that autonomy can be something that is gained, lost, and restored, to varying *degrees*, in different social environments and contexts of decision-making. This acknowledgement is compatible with evaluating, *on balance*, the possible asymmetries of autonomy between certain groups, based on social enablements that are *generally* granted (or not granted) to them.

A further question for my view might be about the role that subjectivity and individual psychology plays—or does not play—for my account. Some might worry that my making distinctions between the autonomy of the oppressed and the autonomy of the oppressor either problematically imputes psychological tendencies on certain groups of people (say, by assuming that the CRs must have been socially blackmailed into submissive or deferent mindsets) or is *disrespectful* of agents' own experiences of autonomy (say, by claiming one is nonautonomous when one feels contrary to that claim). These are critiques that may be directed towards strongly substantive views like Stoljar's, as mentioned in section 2. I would need to clarify, then, how I take an agent's social standing, and the agent's individual decision-making processes, to interact. Here, I would just reiterate that my emphasis on agents' social standing enables me to at least circumvent problematic psychological projection in any case. I have no need to make assumptions or judgments about agents' psychologies to evaluate the impact on autonomous standing that might result primarily from radical differences or inequalities in social standing, as was the case in

my example of the CR and the MM. My view thereby does not disrespect agents' subjective experiences. Because I take autonomy to be a phenomenon that manifests to varying degrees in various social contexts, the determinations of autonomy we might make on my account would not amount to attributing autonomy or nonautonomy in a *wholesale* fashion. We can, for instance, *appreciate* that the CR may endorse contraceptive decision-making deferral individually; at the same time, we can still engage in a general critique of a society that prescribes problematic decision-making paradigms in accordance with traditional gendered roles and oppressive norms.

Conclusion

To sum up, Natalie Stoljar's normative competence account of autonomy helpfully articulated why there is a "feminist intuition," according to which internalized oppression is inconsistent with autonomy. Her view posed an important challenge to procedural accounts, which were unable to explain exactly why oppression has problematic effects on autonomy. However, Stoljar's view fell short of accommodating the further possibility that those who oppress and those who are oppressed may not be equivalently nonautonomous. I have taken Diana Meyers's example of the unregenerate macho male to illustrate this point. On Stoljar's view, the macho male would be just as nonautonomous as the contraceptive risk-taker, since both cases appear to exhibit a lack of normative competence. I have proposed, instead, that there is an asymmetry of autonomy between the cases that might be explained by recourse to certain considerations about one's social standing.

Being able to distinguish between the autonomy of oppressors and those under oppression is of high interest if we care not to treat those who *perpetrate* the oppression in the same way that we treat those who are the *recipients* of oppression. My view has met this demand by problematizing the potential *misattribution* of nonautonomy to oppressors like the MM, whom I take to be *comparatively* more autonomous and correspondingly liable in ways that the CR is not. Thus, my account offers a promising way to account for Stoljar's feminist intuition, whilst still being able to take seriously and adequately address the concern that those who are oppressors and those who are oppressed are not equivalently nonautonomous.

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J. Y. LEE is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Copenhagen. She works on the Velux-funded project titled "The Future of Family Relationships," which aims to philosophically investigate family structures and values in light of social change and assisted reproductive technologies.