

# Individuality and Source of Violence

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## Abstract

In feminist ethics, the freedom to choose one's way of living is primary to the struggle against patriarchy. Such a choice to live a certain way is a manifestation of one's individuality. This assertion of individuality is accompanied by responsibility towards consequences of the way of living. To explore the relation between individuality and responsibility, I develop and build the hypothetical situation of a mother and daughter with different ways of living. The notion of a good life for each of them is mentioned and we ask: To what extent is the daughter responsible for the anguish that the mother undergoes in her assertion of individuality (through her choice of way of living)? My primary aim in this paper is to question the nature of individuality and to probe the claim that individuality is a source of violence. This will involve discussing the scope of responsibility for one's choices and the difficulty in forming a criterion to delineate such a scope.

**Keywords** — Way of living, responsibility, choice

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## 1 Introduction

We are responsible for our actions and in many situations that constitute our daily life, we are also held responsible for the effect of our actions on others. The objective of this paper is to clarify definitions of choice and responsibility which could enable women to delineate their scope of responsibility in varying situations. Consider these instances: You are responsible for:

∞ The performance of your term paper,

- ∞ The pain  $x$  undergoes after you slap him,
- ∞ The growth of a Kochia plant in your garden, owing to the daily care,
- ∞ The provocation that someone undergoes because of your “revealing” clothes,
- ∞ The frustration that your friend undergoes because you canceled a plan at the last minute, and
- ∞ The agony of a dog after you stepped on her leg.

In the above cases, we can subtly distinguish between instances where you are responsible and are not responsible for the effect on the other. It is this scope of responsibility that I intend to explore. I will be presenting a specific case to discuss the different facets of freedom of choice and responsibility.

## 2 The “M” Word

Consider  $x$  and  $y$  such that:

- ∞  $x$  and  $y$  are women.
- ∞  $x$  is a well-meaning person towards  $y$ .
- ∞  $y$  does not believe in marriage.
- ∞  $x$  believes in marriage.
- ∞  $x$  and  $y$  discuss different aspects of marriage to explain their positions.

$y$  does not wish to get married and hopes to live on her own. She also hopes that over time, if it suits her, she could share her living space with other people.  $x$ , on the other hand, believes that it is more suitable for  $y$  to get married. Here is a list of reasons  $x$  offers to provide  $y$  a comprehensive view of her position:

The belief that one can live alone throughout life is impractical: It does not consider the aging process and that as one grows older, there is higher probability of the need for caretaking. Getting married and starting a family is akin to establishing an emotionally driven support system which would stand by her in times of need.

The decision to not marry lacks foresight: It is possible that  $y$  would feel lonely and could desire company in the later stages of her life. However, in case she does intend to marry later, given the status of matrimonial setups in our country, it could get difficult for her to find like-minded people once she is older.

Self-evidence with appeal to age: We can imagine that  $x$  could have been a woman who desired to remain single initially and her decision to marry was not entirely a peaceful one. However, after her marriage, she realizes it was the right decision. In this case,  $x$  could say that it is not until  $y$  would be older that she might recognize the significance of marriage and as mentioned earlier, it might be too late by then.

In response to this,  $y$  points out that marriage is a decision which would affect her throughout her life. It is her choice to not get married and she would have to face the consequences of it- both the supposedly good and bad ones. More importantly, that she holds herself responsible for this decision. It is possible to conjecture that  $y$  could ground her decision to not get married on principle: that is,  $y$  does not believe in marriage since she believes that marriage and the accompanying structure of family is only one of the ways in which we can institutionalize emotional intimacy shared by human beings.

Let us suppose that  $y$ 's attitude towards marriage frustrates  $x$ .  $x$  could be related to  $y$  such that she or he would be affected socially through the latter's decision to not marry.  $x$  points out that  $y$  suffers from extreme individuality owing to which she is blinded from sensing rationality in  $x$ 's viewpoint<sup>1</sup>.

Given the above description of the situation, the question I intend to pose is: Is  $y$  responsible for  $x$ 's frustration? More specifically, is  $y$  responsible for the effect that her actions incur on  $x$ ?

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1. Previously, I had planned to discuss the relation of  $x$  and  $y$  as that of mother and daughter. However, there are a variety of intricacies which I intended to discuss including the form of relationship and its entailments. Owing to the limitation of words, I have provided a prototype for the case where  $x$  and  $y$  are related and their actions affect each other. Such a model can be multiply realized through the relation of parent-child, brother-sister, caretaker, friends and others.

## 3 Ethics: Freedom of Choice and Responsibility

### 3.1 Individuality

Each of us has a way of living and such a way of living is constituted by a network of ways in which we behave with the world around us. Individuality is manifested through one's way of living- that you are an individual is reflected in the ways in which you interact with the world around you. More specifically, individuality is the continuous developing of one's ways of interacting with the world through free choice and corresponding responsibility. Given this definition, the next question would be: Is there a right or wrong way of life? And if there is, then how do we recognize it?

### 3.2 Freedom of Choice and Responsibility

Freedom of choice contains in the ability to access possibilities or courses of action in a situation and to actualize the course of action which aligns with the ways in which you intend to live (Guignon 1998). However, my freedom of choice is not absolute but conditioned. You are not free to do *anything* you want. It is this conditionality which I discuss in the following paragraphs.

Every course of action has consequences in our world and the doer is accountable for the ways in which the action affects those around her. Responsibility refers to this accountability towards one's actions, that one can be held answerable and appraised for those actions(Shoemaker 2011).

As ethical agents, our foremost freedom of choice is that you and I can choose to interact with the world around us in ways we find suitable(Olafson 2009). For instance,  $x$  and  $y$  can choose to wear the clothes they desire and also to follow or not follow a religion. This is within their scope of choice.

Given this understanding of freedom of choice and responsibility, how do we decide what  $y$  is responsible for and what she is not responsible for? Let us diverge from the above example and consider this case: Suppose that  $x$  and  $y$  share their living space and they have different taste in music.  $y$  likes country songs while  $x$  likes Hindustani-Carnatic fusion music. Though they have different rooms,  $y$  plays her music at a volume which hinders  $x$  from listening to her choice of music. In this case,  $y$ 's actions have infringed on conditions prerequisite for  $x$  to carry out her freedom of choice. Though  $x$

has access to the desirable course of action, that is, she can listen to music of her choice, the actualization has been hindered by  $y$ 's actions.

Let us compare the above case with the instance of  $y$ 's decision to not marry and its impact on  $x$ .  $y$ 's decision to not get married impacts her marriage prospects in the future along with the possibility of loneliness and lack of support system (in the familial sense) to take care of her. However,  $y$  holds herself responsible for the consequences of her decision.  $x$  is affected by her decision though there is no clear way in which we can causally link the ways in which  $y$ 's life would get affected by this decision. This assumes that  $x$  would not have to face the consequences of  $y$ 's choice. This means:  $y$  would not, without explicit consent, assume that  $x$  would resolve her loneliness, would be her support system in times of need and  $y$  would not blame  $x$  for not "putting sense into her and getting her married anyway".

I propose that a person is responsible for those effects of her action where the effect alters the conditions needed for the other to exercise her/his freedom of choice. In application to the case of  $x$  and  $y$ , her choice to not marry does not hinder conditions  $x$  requires to lead her way of life. However, one could point out that the social consequences of  $y$  not getting married affect  $x$  and indirectly, affect her ways of interacting with the world. Perhaps,  $x$  was a parent to  $y$  who is held indirectly responsible for  $y$ 's decision. I address these possible scenarios in the following section, through the notion of violence.

## 4 Violence

There are different ways of living. That is, there are different ways in which  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$  interact with the world around them. I suggest that violence consists in the act of imposing a certain way of life on the other. The belief that there is an absolutely right or wrong way of living is an exemplification of moral absolutism. Broadly, absolutism posits universal moral principles as the basis for ways to live and in accordance or discordance with these principles, declares ways of living to be advisable or avoidable. Such moral absolutism often takes the form of socially prescribed ways of living: for instance, in case of  $y$ , her life is considered to be morally acceptable and more importantly, psychologically fulfilling provided she gets married and has children. Women who decide to do otherwise are considered immoral (though such opinions are often expressed in milder tones) and are perceived as being

psychologically dissatisfied with their lives, despite evidence to the contrary. In simple terms, violence is committed when a way of life is pronounced to be absolutely right or wrong (Cawston 2015). This also enables us to trace the relation between domination and violence: to dominate the other is to declare that there are certain ways of intersubjective interaction which are acceptable and that it is only in behaving in such ways that they are welcomed to be citizens of our society in a full-fledged sense. One often uses positions of power or socially sanctioned authority to promote and reinforce such socially absolute norms, thus forming a social infrastructure that, as a whole, endorses certain ways of life and rejects others.

Applying this to the case of  $x$  and  $y$ , I contend that the effect on  $x$  (frustration or agony) is owing to the social norm of a morally acceptable life, rather than in virtue of  $y$ 's decision. Though  $y$  could be the realization of denial of the social norm and thus, might appear to be the direct cause, it is in  $x$ 's obedience of the broader set of morally absolute social norms that ground her response. Such an analysis does not undermine the emotional intimacy that underlies the acceptance of such rules; one could reason that it is owing to her immense concern for  $y$  that  $x$  follows such rules since she does not wish for the former to be cast out from the society. The analysis intends to reveal that the reason for frustration or agony at the rejection of socially accepted moral norms is due to the belief in moral absolutism.

## 5 Moral Norms

A significant complaint to the position suggested here towards social norms could be that it can foster exploitation. It seems to be proposed that all social rules and norms are unacceptable since they would, in a certain way, prescribe a certain way of interacting with the world and therefore, they should be shunned. Such an interpretation of my proposal ignores the core tenet of freedom of choice and responsibility: You are responsible for those effects of your action which hinder or further the conditions required for possibility of the others' ways of living (that is, their freedom of choice).

Our socially prescribed rules do not tell  $x$  or  $y$  how to lead their lives but tells them its relational value and with respect to this relational value, it pronounces an act ethical or unethical. Consider the case of rape:

*A rapes y.*  $A$  rationalizes that  $y$  wore provocative clothes and this caused him to rape  $y$ . Here, when we apply the core tenet of freedom of choice and

responsibility, we realize:

1. *A* believes in moral absolutism: He believes that there are certain ways in which women must dress to be socially treated as persons. (ANI 2018; Bose and Nandy 2018). This is the imposition of a certain way of life on *y*, violence. In stronger terms, *A* drains the responsibility of his action onto *y*.
2. *y*'s act of wearing her choice of clothes does not hinder or further another person's way of life.

When we apply the above account of choice and responsibility on one hand and moral absolutism and violence on the other to the case of *x* and *y*, regarding music: In her act of playing the music on high volume, *y* is indirectly imposing her way of life on *x*, by hindering conditions (a quiet space) that the latter requires to practice her freedom of choice.

## 6 Conclusion

There are different ways of life. A way of life refers to certain ways of interacting with the world around us, based on our beliefs, intentions, thoughts and desires. The claim that there is a way of life which is absolutely morally right or wrong manifests moral absolutism. Violence consists in the imposition of a certain way of life on the other, in virtue of upholding of moral absolutism. Moral absolutism is the belief that there are certain universal moral principles which can imply acceptable and unacceptable ways of life. Assuming that the participants are moral agents with freedom to choose and capacity to uphold responsibility, a person is responsible for those effects of their actions which affect the conditions required for the other to lead their way of life. However, it is crucial to identify if the other's way of life preaches moral absolutism and professes an effect owing to this or if one's action hinders the other from practicing their freedom of choice.

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