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Relational approaches to personal autonomy

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Abstract

Individualistic traditions of autonomy have long been critiqued by feminists for their atomistic and asocial presentation of human agents. Relational approaches to autonomy were developed as an alternative to these views. Relational accounts generally capture a more socially informed picture of human agents, and aim to differentiate between social phenomena that are conducive to our agency versus those that pose a hindrance to our agency. In this article, I explore the various relational conceptualizations of autonomy proffered to date. I critically review some of the ongoing internal disputes within the relational autonomy literature, and conclude the article by taking stock of the value of relational autonomy despite these unresolved debates.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The concept of autonomy can be understood in a range of ways within philosophy. 'Autonomy' has its etymological roots in the Greek *autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule); it was originally used to denote self-governing city states in ancient Greece. Following Immanuel Kant's understanding of moral agency in the Enlightenment era, however, the concept of *moral* autonomy took precedence in philosophy. Kant claimed that agents must act in accordance with reason "and to identify with those rational regulations" (Formosa, 2013, p. 194) if they are to be morally autonomous.

From the mid-twentieth century, the concept of autonomy saw a resurgence in moral and political philosophy. In contrast to Kant's *impersonal* moral account of autonomy (Taylor 2005) which was about rationally self-legislating moral laws, philosophers began debating about *personal* or *individual* autonomy, which has to do with living in accordance with one's *own*, self-determined preferences (whatever that may mean). The concept of personal autonomy is now widely thought to hold "a privileged place in modern moral philosophy" as a cornerstone and value of liberalism. (Anderson, 2003, p. 149) However, personal autonomy might also appear "complex and ambiguous," (Campbell, 2017, p. 383) as it has often been identified with all kinds of loosely related (though notably individualistic) characteristics, descriptions, and ideals. For example, personal autonomy has been thought to capture "capacities

that render individual persons capable of self-rule," (Sneddon, 2013, p. 3) or perhaps the ability to be one's own person and to "make up one's own mind about how to act." (Buss, 2005, p. 195) It has also been associated with self-assertion, critical reflection, freedom from obligation, absence of external causation, and knowledge of one's interests. (Dworkin, 2015, p. 8).

The rest of this article will provide a review of the major *relational* approaches to personal autonomy, which have flourished in the past two decades or so thanks to critical feminist work on personal autonomy. It is important to clarify here that such critiques do not reject the idea of autonomy *outright*, but rather certain historical interpretations of it (Cooke, 1998, p. 260) which are influenced by "the Enlightenment paradigm." These critiques are made in part due to the fact that even the more contemporary tradition of personal autonomy tends to idealize the subject as acting "independently of interests, bodily desire, others, prejudice or tradition." (Colebrook, 1997, p. 21) Hence, the concept of *personal* autonomy might remain one which problematically reproduces a Kantian-style tendency to treat the agent as an ideally *atomistic* entity and independent rational agent. (Freeman, 2011, p. 364) What Marina Oshana says is criticizable about this Kantian-style autonomy is its potential to *over*emphasize the value of a person's success in directing their life according to universal principles of reason. (Oshana, 2001, p. 212) The worry is that this emphasis might unduly overshadow the relevance and importance of agents' emotions, social relationships, and "the non-impartial nature of any actual ethical standpoint" (Oshana, 2001, p. 212) in the making of human agency – aspects of agency which have a long tradition of being relegated to the 'feminine' sphere. Thus, the Enlightenment paradigm of autonomy is criticized for idealizing "self-made and self-making men" (Nedelsky, 1989, p. 8) as its paragon, and for associating the concept of personal autonomy to a *masculinized* or male-oriented achievement of separateness. (Donchin, 2000, p. 189; Lee, 2007, p. 84) Relational approaches are motivated in part to *resist* the broadly individualistic associations made of personal autonomy, with feminist critics especially problematizing the individualistic idea that the autonomous agent can be a "disembedded, disembodied self" at all. (Meyers, 2005, p. 200)

The individualistic tradition of autonomy has been charged as "inimical to many women" (Code, 2000) in particular, for several reasons. It might be, firstly, more difficult for women to *access* this kind of individualism. Personal autonomy understood in the individualistic sense constitutes a resource that is unjustly denied to women, or even something that men often attain at the *expense* of those women. The artist Paul Gauguin's infamous decision to "abandon his family and middle-class life as a stockbroker in Paris to travel to Mediterranean France, Tahiti, and Martinique in search of artistic subjects and inspiration" (Friedman, 2000, p. 35) is a case in point of the type of 'autonomy' feminists find suspect. Gauguin found himself choosing between his art and his family, ultimately writing that "One man's faculties cannot cope with two things at once, and I for one can do one thing only: paint…" (Friedman, 2000, p. 35) Marilyn Friedman makes the important point that his decision to leave behind his family in favour of independent pursuits, in line with the more atomistic ideal of autonomy, was not socially censured. On the contrary, it was by and large viewed as an expression of his autonomy, with his resulting artwork culturally prized and widely celebrated thereafter. One might argue that the underappreciated aspect of autonomy hidden from view here is the fact that Gauguin's artistic journey *depended* on the support he received from his family, as tends to be the case for many career-oriented men who might depend on the domestic work of mostly women to be able to focus on their careers (Friedman, 2014, p. 58).

This may be why feminist philosophers find this individualist tradition of autonomy to be "…inhospitable to women, one that represents a masculine-style pre-occupation with self-sufficiency and self-realization at the expense of human connection." (Friedman, 2000, p. 35) The romanticization of man's quest for meaning presupposes that "other people function primarily as obstacles to the realization of an individual's plans or goals," (Abrams, 1999, p. 831) thereby obscuring the fact that such endeavours are often only made possible by the invisible and domesticized labour of women who are left to *support* such endeavours in the background.

Yet, one might object here that there is no reason in principle why women could not *also* break free of their social ties in such fashion. Be that as it may, women are traditionally expected to "preserve just the sorts of relationships…that autonomy-seeking men sometimes want to abandon." (Friedman, 2000, p. 35) As Mark Piper observes, gendered socialization processes disadvantage women when it comes to opportunities for self-expression, since

young girls and women are often be taught to be submissive to men and to focus on domestic life over other pursuits. (Piper, 2014, p. 256) It seems plausible to anticipate, for instance, a degree of condemnation towards *mothers* who choose to abandon their families in pursuit of interests which deviate from those that define a woman or mother's *normative* social role. We need only recall literary pieces like Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House* for a predictable societal response. In Ibsen's play, Nora decides to leave behind her home, her husband, and children, in pursuit of her own freedom from oppression. Her protesting husband Thorvald scolds her and tells her that she is, before all else, "a wife and a mother." Thus, *her* freedom is accompanied by censure; to avoid it, she would have to continue abiding by motherhood norms at the cost of her preferred life choices. This thereby places someone like Nora in an oppressive *double bind* not faced by men: whatever she chooses to do, she faces a negative outcome. (Hirji, 2021, p. 649) This is suggestive of the fact that the ideal of autonomy, as understood within the cultural imaginary, is extremely costly if not outright inaccessible to women against this background of oppression, whilst exclusively lionizing *men* who become 'independent' at the expense of social relationships and the supportive women who are expected to take up caring roles in their stead.

Relatedly, we might say that the issue runs deeper than women's *access* to this individualistic type of personal autonomy. Individualistic traditions, in the first place, insufficiently recognize the role and value of qualities traditionally coded as 'feminine' for individual agency. If *inter*dependent qualities like trust and loyalty (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, p. 6) are naturally conceived of as *incompatible* with autonomy, care-oriented decisions might fail to be appreciated as autonomous. For those who claim that certain caring relationships are in fact "a necessary precondition of autonomy," (Clement, 1996, p. 24) the individualistic associations of autonomy – at least when those associations are treated as mutually exclusive with other aspects of agency, like caring and dependent relations – are wrong-headed to begin with. In short, what is objectionable about the individualistic view is less about the fact that certain people cannot access it, but that it is metaphysically committed to a mistaken vision of human agency as *separable* from the *inter*dependent and socially embedded contexts of persons and selves.

2 | THE RELATIONAL TURN: VARIETIES OF RELATIONAL APPROACHES

It should now be clear that an overtly individualistic conception of autonomy runs the risk of promoting a "misguided and potentially oppressive male ideal of leading one's life." (Baumann, 2008, p. 446) This is because the individualistic tradition discriminates against women: it can reinforce their oppression by *excluding* them from access to choices that may be taken up freely by men, for example, or by *underrating* caring values traditionally coded as 'feminine' traits. But if autonomy otherwise plays a "key justificatory role" in grounding entitlement to certain normative goods, such as being treated respectfully and having one's decisions taken seriously (Holroyd, 2009, p. 322), it would be all the more imperative to ensure autonomy is conceptualized in a socially inclusive way. Many feminist philosophers share the hope that autonomy could serve as an important tool of emancipation and empowerment for those who deal with systemic abuse, domination, or other oppressive circumstances. (Veltman & Piper, 2014, p. 1) On this view, autonomy should be *reclaimed* from the atomistic tradition to serve a more liberatory purpose: its aim would be precisely to *recognize* the role that societal and cultural norms have played in the shaping of women's subordination (and the scaffolding of male dominance discussed in the previous paragraphs), and to consequently challenge and combat the inhibiting role they can play in women's agency. (Rowland-Serdar & Schwartz-Shea, 1991, p. 617) After all, if we understand autonomy as crucially *depending* on social and personal relationships (Westlund, 2012, p. 59), those seeking to analyse how a balanced relationship between self, others, and society might be constructed should make the topic of autonomy a principal interest. Any feminist programme concerned with emancipating women from oppressive binds, especially, "must in some way see [autonomy] as a central concern." (Grimshaw, 1988, p. 43) This brings us to the central topic of this article: *the relational turn* in autonomy literature.

Relational autonomy is an umbrella term. (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, p. 4) It does not refer to any specific account of autonomy; however, a core conviction that relational approaches share is some version of the idea that

individual selves are *social* beings, and that this is *compatible* with personal autonomy precisely because our Selves are "fundamentally socially (and bodily) related to other selves." (Wallace, 2019, p. 196) Relational views take for granted the plausible presumption that the Self is related to others in various ways; who we are and how we identify ourselves is never a practice that is achieved alone. As such, they reject the kind of individualism associated with "… some liberal and especially libertarian conceptions of autonomy" (Mackenzie, 2013, p. 42) and recognize, instead, that individual identities are shaped by agents' social relationships and social determinants like gender, class, and race. (Mackenzie, 2013, p. 43)

The assertion that the Self is relational is not a new or distinctive observation in philosophy: after all, no theory of autonomy (feminist or non-feminist) seriously *denies* the underlying philosophy that agents are to some extent socialized and social beings, even if they differ in emphasis with respect to the importance of this fact. For instance, 'communitarian' literature since the 80's has critiqued liberalism and libertarianism for their overemphasis on individualism over community, or the common good (Etzioni, 2013), implying instead that we should conceive of political agents as shaped by the social relations in which they are immersed. For example, Charles Taylor's critique of atomism in the context of political theory states that "the identity of the autonomous, self-determining individual requires a social matrix," (Taylor, 1985, p. 209) one which for example recognizes that people need to be given "a voice in deliberation about public action." John Christman also explains that in our contemporary political context, any conception of the citizen as "*un*connected to social practices and categories, cultural traditions, and other marks of identity" (Christman, 2009, p. 21) would fail to garner any legitimacy.

Relational theories of autonomy have much in common with these parallel critiques of the atomistic Self. What follows from a *relational* Self is that our personal autonomy can only be developed within a society. (Barclay, 2000, p. 57) Relational theories explicitly use "feminist work on social groups and social oppression" (Mackenzie, 2019, p. 145) to make considerations of social justice a central concern for the question of individual agency. Relationality, according to Beate Rössler, can be both "an enabling condition and…an obstacle to autonomy." (Rössler, 2002, p. 148) By conceiving of the individual agent as necessarily enmeshed in social relations, then, we can explore ways that social ties can be a *positive* or *negative* resource for the agent in all their endeavours – that is, how social factors contribute to an individual's *autonomy*. As Linda Barclay mentions, a precondition for our being able to 'sustain' autonomy is "…attributable to our developing and remaining embedded within a network of social relationships." (Barclay, 2000, p. 57) How relationships affect different agents' autonomy, of course, can be variable – in relationships of domination, for instance, one participant gets to assert their will over the subordinated participant (Friedman, 2003b, p. 96) to the *detriment* of the latter's agency. By focussing on ways that these social dynamics can play out, relational autonomy theorists endeavour to resist the individualistic tradition of autonomy and to reconstitute autonomy as a socially sensitive concept.

It is an important and unique aspect of relational autonomy, then, that it is premised on a social view of the Self, and that it attempts at the same time to figure out what sorts of social circumstances will in fact boost or undermine personal autonomy. It should be noted now, however, that relational approaches have been proposed in many forms over the decades. There are various theoretical lines along which we might divide and categorize them. One place to start is by distinguishing between *procedural* and *substantive* accounts of autonomy, as this is one conceptual division which has featured prominently in contemporary autonomy debates. Procedural accounts are concerned with the formal properties of an agent's decision-making process (Friedman & Bolte, 2007; Kauppinen, 2011, p. 259), rather than with the content of *what* agents ultimately choose. This implies that it is possible for choices with *any* content to be autonomously made (Knutzen, 2020, p. 176), making procedural accounts *content-neutral*. John Santiago asserts that the central intuition behind these proceduralist autonomy theories is the intuition of 'self-choice,' whereby autonomy is thought to be "constituted by a special class of free choices." (Santiago, 2005, p. 79) Another way that procedural theories have been described is as a matter of *authenticity* – on which being true to oneself may be understood as "endorsement of, or absence of alienation from, the principles according to which one lives one's life." (Oshana, 2007, p. 411).

It is worth surveying in a little more detail the tradition of formal approaches to autonomy which preceded the more feminist renditions of proceduralism. On Harry Frankfurt's *hierarchical* approach (Taylor, 2005, p. 1), a person

with a first-order desire to act must possess a congruent second-order volition for that desire to move them "all the way to action" (Frankfurt, 1971, p. 10) to be autonomous. This means that someone who *wants to want* to eat a cake would be autonomous in their desire because their second-order volition is identified with their first-order desire. By contrast, someone who wants to eat a cake but *doesn't* want to want that at the higher level would be non-autonomous. Gerald Dworkin, however, critiqued Frankfurt's 'local' approach – which only pinpoints specific preferences over short periods of time – in favour of a more 'global' outlook on autonomy that can assess whether an agent is autonomous over an extended period of time. What matters on Dworkin's view is not simply that our desires be congruent at lower- and higher-levels in some specific instance or moment in time, but that agents have and enact the second-order *capacity* to "raise the question of whether [one] will identify with or reject the reasons" (Dworkin, 1988, p. 15) for which one acts. In short, people ought in general to reflect critically on their first-order desires and preferences (Dworkin, 1988, p. 20) and to accept or change those desires in light of one's higher-order values. They should, at the same time, be *procedurally independent*, meaning that their decisions must not have come about as a result of undue influences which disrupt the agent's ability to make their own decisions. (Dworkin, 1976, p. 25) Brainwashing, indoctrination, misinformation, blackmail, coercive threats, and compulsion are typically cited as examples of such undue influences (Christman, 2014, p. 374; Brahm Levey, 2015, p. 2).

While the accounts mentioned above are not directly associated with relational autonomy, some procedural theorists working within the feminist tradition find sympathy with this tradition of thinking about autonomy in terms of attaining authenticity. John Christman, for example, has argued for a more historically sensitive rendition of proceduralism, on which we ought to assess the *processes* of preference formation and whether the agent would resist that process given the chance. (Christman, 1991, p. 10) He further developed his view by asserting that one ought not to be *alienated* with respect to one's characteristics upon 'sustained' critical self-reflection. That is, one ought not to want to *repudiate* or feel 'constrained' by one's preferences (Christman, 2009a, p. 143) given the conditions under which they came about, upon continued critical self-reflection over a period of time in a variety of contexts. Unlike Frankfurt or Dworkin, Christman has explicitly acknowledged that the Self which undergirds autonomy is "constituted by social elements," and thus social patterns that induce self-alienation could be said to be inimical to autonomy (Christman, 2004, p. 146).

Another procedural theory in the feminist tradition is Marilyn Friedman's content-neutral theory of autonomy. According to Friedman, autonomous behaviour involves personal commitments, as well as self-reflection and 'reaffirmations' of those commitments. (Friedman, 2003a, p. 11) This process must involve an agent's "perspectival identity," which contains traits, desires, preferences, and "features of herself she cares deeply about" (Friedman, 2003a, p. 11) from a first-personal perspective, and not simply characteristics like gender or membership in some racial group which has been *attributed* to the agent's identity (nonchosen traits are only relevant for autonomy if they matter to the agent). Caring about one's own identity, in this context, must involve attending to such characteristics with a kind of "positively valenced attitude…that manifests itself in choice and actions." (Friedman, 2003a, p. 11, 2011) If one did not particularly *care* about being English, for instance, then even behaviour which closely and consistently mirrors that of traits typically ascribed to an English identity would not necessarily represent an autonomous part of the individual.

While procedural approaches can be considered advantageous because it is tolerant of the different preferences that people may develop within their respective social environments, some theorists have criticized procedural accounts on the basis that they are "disposed to be permissive" about certain decision-making inputs, making them too lenient about autonomy. (Piper, 2016, p. 771) Jean Keller says, for example, that a major concern for feminist theorists is the phenomenon of girls and women who undergo "socialization processes that curb their ambitions and abilities, make them excessively dependent on the approbation of others, and induce them to over-identify with the goals of others…," with the apparent result that their personal autonomy is undermined. (Keller, 1997, p. 153) Although we might say that *all* preferences are in some sense formed within the limitations of possibility, "not all preferences are unconscious, pathological responses to oppression." (Walsh, 2015, p. 829) An unjust world might effectively "socialize us to prefer conditions or options that are bad for us," (Terlazzo, 2016, p. 206) and the threat

of this latter possibility might be a blind spot for proceduralist theories. These insights are of primary concern for *substantive* theorists.

Natalie Stoljar, for instance, has said that purely procedural approaches cannot account for why oppressive norms of femininity are inimical (Stoljar, 2000, p. 95) to personal autonomy. This is because proceduralism in principle permits even those agents who have internalized oppressive norms to count as fully autonomous. After all, the *content* of what agents internalize is not relevant to the proceduralist, so long as the agent satisfies certain formal standards thought to make one 'authentic'. The example Stoljar uses is of contraceptive risk-taking women. These women, despite having free access to contraception, and possessing critically reflective skills, still opted to take contraceptive risks partly due to false and oppressive norms (e.g. it is inappropriate for women to plan for sex) and ended up having unwanted pregnancies. In Stoljar's view, preferences influenced by the internalization of "oppressive norms of femininity" (Stoljar, 2000, p. 94) evoke the intuition that they are not autonomous. She claimed in one of her earlier accounts of autonomy that agents must thus exercise *normative competence* – a skill which enables one to identify and exclude oppressive norms from one's decision-making process – to count as autonomous. In her later work, Stoljar elaborates that oppressive 'social scripts' which call for the adaptation, anticipation, adjustment, accommodation, and evaluation on part of the targeted group undermines the kind of *psychological freedom* that would be necessary for autonomy (Stoljar, 2014, p. 118).

Within the substantive category, we can further distinguish between *strong* substantive views and *weak* substantive views. Stoljar's normative competency view was an example of a strong substantive view because it places a *direct* constraint on the "preferences or values that persons can form or act upon autonomously." (Benson, 2005, p. 125) Strongly substantive approaches claim that "not all sober and competent choices can be autonomous: some things simply cannot be autonomously chosen." (Holroyd, 2010, p. 180) By contrast, weak substantive views do not place any direct constraints on an agent's decision-making inputs. They may, however, require that agents hold certain self-regarding attitudes, such as self-respect, self-trust, and self-esteem or self-worth. (Mackenzie, 2017, p. 522; Schemmel, 2021, p. 109) On this latter model, there aren't any moral or epistemic norms that the agent is required to endorse directly, but "her choice-making ought nevertheless to demonstrate certain psychological traits." (Sperry, 2013, p. 888) An example of this is Diana T. Meyers' autonomy competency view, according to which autonomy involves exercise of a "repertory of coordinated skills" (Meyers, 1987, p. 627) to engage in "self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction." (Meyers, 2005, p. 49) Through this process of ongoing reflection, deliberation, and action, a dynamic picture of the authentic self would emerge which reflects the autonomous self. Additionally, Trudy Govier has said that a precondition for exercising these autonomy competencies involves certain self-regarding attitudes like a base level of self-trust, which will enable the agent to confidently hold firm in the legitimacy of their own memories, skills, and judgments, and to "discriminate between apt and ill-founded challenges from others." (Govier, 1993, p. 111) As such, weak substantive views fall somewhere in between strong substantive accounts and procedural accounts: they "invoke values other than autonomy to explicate autonomous choice and action," but do not require any specific action to be taken on part of the autonomous individual save for this autonomy-constituting process. (Meyers, 2014b, p. 115)

Another way to distinguish between relational approaches to autonomy is to inquire into whether they are *internalist* or *externalist* accounts. *Internalist* accounts tend to treat certain *psychological* processes of an agent's choice-shaping and choice-making to be the relevant primary indicator of an agent's autonomy. The frameworks concerned with determining agents' *authenticity*, then, are examples of internalist accounts, because they try to identify the internal (and autonomy-conferring) reflective and motivational structures held by the agent. Internalist approaches acknowledge that external factors can indeed *impact* the structure of an agent's psychology (Mackenzie, 2021, p. 36) positively or negatively, making them *causally* relational; but they emphasize the point that it is the agent's psychology which ultimately determines whether or not they are autonomous.

Externalist approaches, on the other hand, focus primarily on conditions *external* to the agent as the relevant criteria, like the phenomenon of social oppression or the agents who *perpetuate* the oppression and the way that these external factors encroach on the individual agent. External approaches are typically *constitutively* relational

accounts because they posit the strong claim that autonomy is not merely *caused* by social patterns, but itself constituted by "social relationships, norms, practices, and institutions." (Mackenzie, 2021, p. 36) In this respect, constitutive views of autonomy are typically allied with strong substantivism. If certain social dynamics are indeed additionally necessary to constitute autonomy, we can make sense of why the substantivst – in the context of our *non-ideal* social world in which certain groups are marginalized over others – would resist the idea that autonomy can be had by everybody equally even if they did all satisfy the psychological regulations necessary for autonomy.

Since we have covered the 'authenticity' accounts typical for internalism, let us delve further into what motivates externalist approaches. Rebekah Johnston states that a major issue with the internalist approach is that it frames oppressive social environments as hindering someone's autonomy by "causing certain sorts of damage to members of partially subordinated social identities." (Johnston, 2017, p. 313) She calls this a 'damage model' of autonomy: a framework that treats the individual as *damaged* under oppressive circumstances, rather than considering the outside environment as *damaging*. A key distinction between the damage model and Johnston's externalist framing consists of the difference in how we conceptualize and *respond* to the damage that is done. On a damage model, the problem lies with the individual since they incur damage to their autonomous capacities. On Johnston's view, however, the problem is not so much about the individual damage the agent incurs, but the fact that some people are by default *ascribed* a violable or expendable status by a 'superordinated' identity. For example, the fact that privileged (or 'superordinated') groups such as men and cis-gender straight people can be the *harassers* of subordinated, 'harassable' groups like women and trans persons mean that women and trans subjects "have a social status that constrains their autonomy." (Johnston, 2017, p. 323) In short, it is the fact that oppressors and those they oppress are *unequal* in their social standing (Lee, 2022, p. 7) which we ought to target as the problem that places certain subordinated groups' autonomy at risk.

Another externalist approach is Marina Oshana's socio-relational account. Oshana, like Stoljar, believes that procedural types of autonomy which rest on "a person's free acceptance of and willingness to defend her circumstances" (Oshana, 2014a, p. 153) are insufficient for autonomy. Oshana's reasons have to do with the social condition of oppression itself. Being an autonomous person is not so much about having authentic values, but about having "the power to determine how [one] shall live" (Oshana, 1998, p. 82), which means that an agent should have regulative control "of the sort that involves the power to do otherwise than one actually does." (Oshana, 2006, p. 75) Thus, severe social constraints – involving subordinating or self-effacing conditions that deprive agents of effective practical control over important arenas of their life – will undermine people's autonomy. One example Oshana gives is that of the 'contented slave.' Unlikely as it is, we might suppose that it is at least *possible* for someone to "knowingly, willingly, and freely [choose] a life of bondage." (Oshana, 1998, p. 87) But though it may be *possible* for someone to psychologically choose conditions of slavery, *being* a slave implies that the agent would no longer have any control over their life. In being a slave, one is irrevocably made subject to the whims of a master, "whether or not punitive treatment is ever realized." (Oshana, 1998, p. 87) It is this lack of control over one's external circumstances that would make someone non-autonomous. People who otherwise fulfil procedural conditions can thus be "immobilized" by their social circumstances, (Oshana, 2014b, p. 7) thus becoming blighted in their autonomous status. On Oshana's view, then, the question of whether people have authenticity is not relevant for dealing with the problem of oppression, because the latter is to be understood as a socio-environmental condition incompatible with autonomous standing.

Others have been skeptical of externalist approaches like Oshana's because of their potentially paternalistic assumptions and implications – and the risk that agents might be *disrespected* as a result. Serene Khader says, for example, that anti-oppressive measures opposing certain kinds of gendered preferences may in fact perpetuate oppression by implying that oppressed people are "poor judges of their own interests." (Khader, 2020, p. 6) Yet the assumption that those who are socially oppressed are deprived of opportunities to exercise autonomy wholesale may not quite ring true to some. The mistake here rests on the conflation of internal capacities or conditions for autonomy with the external conditions for forming and exercising it. (Wenner, 2020, p. 41) Maud Faïle Gauthier-Chung makes a similar point – those who face external challenges may nonetheless still be "competent enough to bear the status

of autonomous agent and formulate decisions about their own life that are worthy of respect and consideration." (Gauthier-Chung, 2017, p. 77) As Diana T. Meyers contends, individuals do not necessarily capitulate to oppression, even where they do not *visibly* resist the oppressive systems under which they are unjustly placed. It still takes the kind of agentic skills necessary for autonomy for someone to be able to navigate and cope with the "obstacles their circumstances present and to take advantage of their opportunities." (Meyers, 2014a, p. 435) Still, individual preferences which are formed as adaptations to and for oppression have been articulated by some as morally problematic because they "reinforce the social structures that oppress the group as a whole," (Cudd, 2014, p. 152) and generate damaging views of one's self (Liebow, 2016, p. 714). But Serene Khader demonstrates in her work that 'adaptive preferences' – typically viewed as "self-depriving desires people form under unjust conditions" (Khader, 2011, p. 4) – ought not to be treated as "autonomy deficits," given that doing so can for example justify inappropriate attitudes towards those with such preferences (Khader, 2009, p. 184).

Further, if social oppression is the topic of concern, it is plausible that *non*-oppression "requires that the personal affirmation of one's subjectivity be recognized by others." (Krause, 2013, p. 202) It may therefore be a disrespectful denial or intolerance of an agent's subjectivity (Galeotti, 2015, p. 45), especially from a cross-cultural perspective, to declare their non-autonomy in light of choices which are perhaps questionably ascribed as capitulations to socially oppressive forces. Ranjoo Seodu Herr has criticized socio-relational accounts like Oshana's because they treat certain groups of women in nonliberal, 'third-world' religious contexts as monolithic. John Christman has written extensively of the potential for relational approaches akin to Oshana's to *entail* political perfectionism, carrying with it a "…danger that autonomy-based principles of justice will exclude from participation those individuals who reject those types of social relations demanded by those views." (Christman, 2005, p. 155) The worry is that such frameworks of autonomy "[entail] perfectionist liberalism" (Stoljar, 2017, p. 29) and a contestable "ideal of a flourishing life" (Christman, 2009b, p. 277) which invoke values that may not be endorsed by citizens. (Killmister, 2013, p. 356) If this is the case, we can see why those embedded in *non*-liberal social contexts might be at risk of getting excluded by discussions of autonomy which implicitly reinforce the view that there is a "universal ideal of human agency that provides the standard by which to judge a person's status as a full agent and…her deservingness of our respect as an equal." (Herr, 2018).

In other words, accounts like Oshana's do not offer us a way to address the fact that "practices that liberals believe inhibit the development of women's autonomy…might in fact express the ability of these women to choose their own values and commitments." (Lépinard, 2011, p. 207) Cécile Laborde has pointed out how a perfectionist commitment to autonomy can be exclusionary for those who engage in practices *singled out* as incompatible with autonomy, citing the hijab controversy in France as an example of how veiled Muslin women are perceived as lacking agency in their choices. (Laborde, 2008, p. 130) As Nancy Hirschmann contends, "the West has tended to view Islam as a barbaric source of women's inequality," (Hirschmann, 1998, 345) which not only picks out certain groups of women as more deprived of autonomy than other groups under patriarchy, but also neglects the complexity and possibility of agency within various structures of constraint. As Christman mentions, it is one thing for theories of autonomy to acknowledge our relatedness, but it is quite another to claim that we can only be autonomous "if related in certain idealized ways." (Christman, 2005, p. 151) The message here is that we ought to be careful not to espouse an idealized relationality at the cost of recognizing the possibility of autonomy for agents who find themselves within *imperfect* social relations (Khader, 2020, p. 2).

In response to Christman's critique, Andrea Westlund has offered a frame of autonomy that she takes to be both externalist *and* proceduralist. While this combination is unusual in the literature given that proceduralism is typically associated with internalism, it is one which might hold the advantage of not being subject to the usual charge against externalism – that the latter requires agents to stand in perfectly egalitarian relations with others. Westlund claims that for one's commitments to count as autonomous, rather, one must "be disposed to answer for those commitments in the face of external, critical challenges." (Westlund, 2009, p. 36) Autonomous agents must thus be disposed to respond to justificatory challenges in "dialog (of some form) with real or imagined others." (Westlund, 2009, p. 39) This dialogical answerability, as Westlund puts it, is a *formal* way for agents to take *responsibility for self*, giving her account

a *procedural* dimension: a self-responsibility that does not carry specific value commitments. This responsibility for self makes it possible for agents in even subordinated positions to exercise autonomy (Westlund, 2003), since our identities and commitments need not be "inflexibly determined by our social position," (Westlund, 2009, p. 42) but rather figured out in dialog with others. On this view, then, a 'Deferential Housewife' – famously described by Thomas Hill Jr. as a character who defers to her husband and "tends not to form her own interests" (Hill Jr. 1973, p. 89) – can be autonomous despite her subordinated social position, so long as she is disposed to answer for *why* she prefers to live the kind of life she does with her potential interlocutors. Paul Benson's view of autonomy based on *agential authority* follows a similar perspective: he says that an agent's authority arises from their being able to regard and place themselves "as being in an appropriate position to speak for [their] decisions and actions." (Benson, 2014, p. 109).

Perhaps another way to deal with concerns like Christman's is to take a more flexible approach regarding the *ascription* of autonomous status. Perhaps we can view autonomy less as an "objective metaphysical property of persons," (Anderson, 2008, p. 21) and more as a type of socially situated status which agents may come to enjoy by virtue of being recognized as autonomous by others. It may not be necessary to demand that agents be relationally situated in certain ways in order to *represent* them as the kinds of persons for whom autonomy is an integral interest and part of their life. As J.Y. Lee has pointed out, *attributing* agents an autonomous status where possible is in the first place a valuable exercise, since assigning such autonomous status confers respect for the relevant agent's decision-making authority. (Lee, 2022, p. 100) In so doing, we can make room to acknowledge and take an agent's first-personal perspective seriously, and not write them off as non-autonomous by default simply because they stand in subordinate relations with others. While this is not to justify that we should think of everybody as autonomous willy-nilly, we could aim to highlight that granting people autonomous standing is a matter of principal importance because it "fixes what others are permitted and obligated to do or refrain from doing." (Anderson, 2014, p. 355) In the context of sex work, for instance, Elizabeth Ben-Ishai has argued that *ascriptions* of autonomy, which are not necessarily "tied to actual capacities for autonomy" (Ben-Ishai, 2010, p. 574), can be exploited to *cultivate* autonomous sexual agency for sex workers. In other words, labelling and treating people as though they are autonomous would warrant the kind of respect that accompanies autonomous individuals, thereby helping those people to *become* autonomous.

More recent approaches to relational autonomy by for instance Catriona Mackenzie and Suzy Killmister have framed autonomy as consisting of various 'dimensions.' (Mackenzie, 2014b, p. 15; Killmister, 2014, p. 163) This idea could serve as a slightly different approach for us to ease out of the conceptual stalemate between internalism and externalism. An inclusive, multidimensional way of autonomy theorizing might help us track the rich layers of autonomy without implicitly reducing the concept of autonomy to just one idea, description, or value. Catriona Mackenzie, for example, advocates an explicitly *multidimensional* approach to autonomy that recognizes three causally *interdependent* elements of autonomy: self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorization. These are supposed to help us make sense of the different intuitions about autonomy which arise from "different value orientations and political commitments." (Mackenzie, 2014b, p. 15) She advances such an approach to move away from the tendency in relational autonomy theorizing to attempt to identify "necessary and sufficient conditions for a preference, decision, or value," which structures debates on autonomy around "examples and counterexamples designed to test the necessity and sufficiency of rival claims." (Mackenzie, 2014a, p. 54) Her multifaceted view treats autonomy as a complex concept, on which people can be autonomous to varying *degrees*, perhaps by meeting one or more dimensions of autonomy without necessarily satisfying *all* of the dimensions at once.

3 | CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE VALUE OF RELATIONAL AUTONOMY THEORIES

Despite the ongoing internal disputes about the nature of autonomy, we should take stock of the positive fact that the varied relational approaches offered in the literature converge on the point that the concept of autonomy can be purposed to emancipatory social ends. The divisions amongst relational theories do not necessarily detract from their common ground and goal, which is to highlight the Self as a necessarily social being, and as affected in both positive and negative ways by the social environment around her.

The focus on the issue of social oppression as a primary *problem* for autonomy, for instance, has been especially helpful for critically examining ethical frameworks based on individualistic understandings of autonomy. In the field of medicine and bioethics where 'principlism' was until recently the ethical standard, relational critiques have helped generate discussions on their limitations. For example, Anne Donchin avers that the principlist's ideal of the autonomous agent is a "…rational patient who calculates from a list of social goods and freely chooses among them." (Donchin, 2001, p. 368) This ideal can disadvanatage women, who are on average perceived as more 'emotional' and less knowledgeable about their symptoms. (Donchin, 1995, p. 45) Relational approaches help us show that such theoretical underpinnings are inadequate for an ethics in the clinic which recognizes the particular social challenges faced by women patients.

And though the relational perspectives reviewed herein *compete* with one another in some ways, much of this tension can be explained as a function of the divergent *ontological and normative commitments* made in the background. For the proceduralist, autonomy is about figuring out what makes someone's desires, preferences, choices, etc. one's own – that is, what makes them *authentic* to the individual. This commitment naturally generates the corresponding desideratum that agents attain conditions under which authenticity is possible. For the substantivist, autonomy functions as a *diagnostic* tool sensitive to the contents of someone's decision-making. It is not very surprising, then, that restricting and excluding oppressive inputs are more of a priority for substantive accounts. Besides, we might even argue that not all of the theoretical divisions discussed herein are as incompatible as they might initially appear. As Laura Davy points out in her discussion of disability, the 'presence' of certain factors – which may be *both* external and internal – can be a way to assess individual autonomy. That is, we should be looking for the presence of factors like "advocates who recognize the agent as a valued individual…external resources available to him or her… internal factors such as self-confidence and self-assertion, dignity, and security." (Davy, 2015, p. 144) This is one plausible manner by which to give due importance to the respectively *external* and *internal* elements that may be involved in autonomy. Moreover, we've seen that for Killmister and Mackenzie, autonomy is articulated as an explicitly multidimensional concept in the first place.

The critical light that relational autonomy theories have shed on overtly individualistic philosophies, and the diverse emancipatory objectives identified among relational approaches, enrich ongoing dialogs about personal autonomy. Relational autonomy thus makes a challenging but valuable contribution to philosophy.

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