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Overly Wide Scope: Including Internalized Sexism and Racism in Identity and Autonomy

Comments on Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera, "Narrative Integration, Fragmented Selves, and Autonomy" and Andrea C. Westlund, "Rethinking Relational Autonomy"

JAMES ROCHA

Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies

Department of Women & Gender Studies

Louisiana State University

106 Coates Hall

Baton Rouge, LA 70803-3901

rocha@lsu.edu

i.

In different ways, issues of scope lie at the center of both Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera's "Narrative Integration, Fragmented Selves, and Autonomy" and Andrea C. Westlund's "Rethinking Relational Autonomy." Mackenzie and Poltera find themselves embroiled in a debate with Galen Strawson over whom exactly a narrative theory of identity excludes. While Mackenzie and Poltera attempt to provide an identity theory that is inclusive of almost all agents, they allow that an autonomy theory would be more restrictive (49-

50). Westlund's position on scope derives from her attempt to build a relational account of autonomy that can respond to John Christman's charge that relational accounts necessarily contain substantive conditions. In developing a purely formal relational account, Westlund sets a very wide scope for autonomy, counting individuals as autonomous even when their relations with others are of a deeply subservient nature.

Feminist theorists have devoted energy to exploring the concept of autonomy with the thought that autonomy could be used for locating and separating out individuals who fell into patterns of behavior dictated by sexism (or any other form of bigotry). That includes both men who fail to question their own sexism and women who internalize sexism. By developing substantive accounts of autonomy, feminists could place conditions on autonomous action that exclude such agents from the scope of autonomy, since society's sexism externally dictates much of their behavior. Substantive accounts give the term a much narrower scope than more traditional formal accounts. Westlund, however, favors the more formal approach and argues for the autonomy of many of those powerfully affected by sexism, but not all of them. And so, Westlund, while responding to Christman's claim that all relational accounts are substantive, also tries to respond to these original feminist worries.

Both the Mackenzie and Poltera account of identity and the Westlund account of autonomy are permissive on the question of scope. While I believe both papers do excellent jobs of responding to the critics they are directly confronting, I wonder whether we want to expand the scope of autonomy, in particular, as widely as Westlund does when she follows the trend set by most non-feminist autonomy theorists. The feminist criticisms to which Westlund is responding may be stronger than is usually thought within the autonomy literature. Before tackling that issue, I'll look at Mackenzie and Poltera's discussion of identity.

ii.

In “Narrative Integration, Fragmented Selves, and Autonomy,” Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera do not set out to discuss autonomy directly, and in fact worry about accounts that conflate autonomy with identity (33, 46). They instead lay out how an agent forms her identity by utilizing a narrative that pulls together her interpretation of who she is in the present, based on who she was in the past, and where she hopes to go in the future (34). This narrative is both constitutive of the agent’s self-understanding and necessary for her future flourishing. Not being able to put together such a narrative is likely to leave the agent with a disorganized view of her self, with no ability to view her life in a coherent, unified way (41-2).

Against this account, Galen Strawson critiques narrative theories for excluding certain types of agents, whom he refers to as “Episodics,” who see themselves in terms of relatively isolated time slices in the present. Mackenzie and Poltera argue quite convincingly that Episodics are not ordinary (37-44). To exhibit what it would be like to lack a narrative-based identity, Mackenzie and Poltera draw from the autobiography of a remarkable woman, Elyn Saks, who tells of her struggles to overcome schizophrenia. Saks has episodes where she is unable to connect various aspects of her self because she is being deluded by artificial images of selfhood that derive from her pathology (31-2, 39-40). Thus, Saks, at least during the times when she is within the grips of schizophrenia, would lack an identity in the narrative sense. Having schizophrenia does not preclude the possibility that she could have an identity – the incorporation of her pathology as a part of her life tale is key to the development of her self-narrative (47-8). But life *within* schizophrenic episodes provides an accurate description of what it would take to be unable to form one’s own identity. Thankfully, few of us live entirely within such episodes, and so the application of “identity” has an incredibly wide scope.

While this account allows a very wide scope for being able to form an identity, it allows a smaller scope for autonomy. Their thought is that autonomy ought to have higher conditions for its attainment than identity formation. Autonomy should at least have competency conditions and authenticity conditions, and Mackenzie and Poltera are open to further conditions that derive from their endorsement of a relational account of autonomy (48-9). These additional conditions would surely narrow down the scope of autonomy, as we can see by asking whether agents who have internalized sexism should count as autonomous.

Clearly, agents who have internalized sexism could develop their own identity on the Mackenzie and Poltera view. The question of autonomy requires a bit more work. Within their competency conditions, Mackenzie and Poltera include that agents not be deluded (48). Further, within the conditions that they consider as possible additions for a relational theory, they mention the requirement of “having certain affective attitudes toward oneself, for example of self-respect, self-esteem, and self-trust” (49). Since they do not explicitly endorse these latter conditions, we can only conclude that Mackenzie and Poltera would at least be open to labeling agents who have internalized sexism as “non-autonomous.” Such agents are deluded in ways that often undermine their self-respect and self-esteem. Since Mackenzie and Poltera did not concentrate on autonomy, we cannot pin down their answer to the scope question much beyond concluding that it would surely be narrower than it is for identity. For another view on autonomy’s scope, it will be useful to turn to Westlund.

iii.

Non-feminist theorists of autonomy have long worried about setting the conditions for autonomy too high since doing so would make autonomy overly rare (perhaps limiting it to the provenance of philosophers who rationalize their everyday

actions) (Young 1980, 567; Dworkin 1988, 17). These mainstream accounts have opted, instead, to determine who is autonomous based on whether individuals set their own life goals (to put it simply); these accounts disallow external judgments on whether the individuals have chosen those goals well.

Feminists have criticized these accounts as representing the autonomous life as too isolated: such accounts seem to see autonomous agents as setting life goals all on their own, as if it were preferable to avoid influences that might judge your goals and urge you to pursue different trajectories. Such accounts would appear to miss the various ways in which our lives, and goal-setting abilities, are interconnected with other agents (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). Autonomy, these feminists convincingly argue, need not be about individuals avoiding the influence of others – autonomy can be about the ways in which we take control over our lives through the aid of others while setting out to live alongside, and sometimes for, these others.

Andrea Westlund, in her “Rethinking Relational Autonomy,” attempts to put together a relational account of autonomy that is also responsive to the more mainstream rejection of substantial conditions. And, for the most part, she succeeds. Westlund’s account is relational insofar as its central condition revolves around the agent’s dispositional ability to defend her various desires, values, and commitments against the imagined or actual criticisms of other agents (28, 33). Thus, Westlund’s account maintains the view of the agent as interconnected with others. At the same time, her condition for autonomy is formal since it does not matter which desires, values, or commitments the agent sets – what matters is the ability to defend them against potential external critiques (36-41). Finally, Westlund’s account remains rooted in the self insofar as the determination of autonomy lies in the agent’s ability to defend herself, and not in the possible reactions of

these external critics (34-5). Westlund’s account is fitting as an autonomy account, is formal, and at least meets the feminist concern of being sufficiently relational so as to not put the patriarchally prized super-individualist up on a pedestal.

On the issue of scope, substantive accounts are likely narrower: substantive conditions exclude more individuals than merely formal conditions would. The basis for choosing between these account-types could thus be recast in terms of whether we think certain types of individuals ought to count as autonomous. I will concentrate on individuals who have deeply internalized a form of bigotry aimed at them, such as women who have deeply internalized sexist values or members of underprivileged races who have deeply internalized racist values. Individuals who deeply internalize such values not only act according to a set of values that represent a disrespect for their selves; they may also find it hard to value themselves at all. Therefore, it is worth asking whether they ought to be included within autonomy’s scope.

Westlund would include many of these individuals as autonomous, which she makes clear in her discussion of Marina Oshana’s Taliban woman case (28-9). Westlund would not say all women under the Taliban count as autonomous while acting as culturally expected. If a woman were forced to act according to Taliban demands, no one would count her actions as autonomous. Actions also would not count as autonomous for Westlund if the women performing them internalized sexist Taliban values but were unable to defend them against criticism. Such agents act from those values in a robotic fashion – without any ownership over the values – and would not count as autonomous for Westlund (29).

Taliban women who deeply internalize sexist Taliban values to the extent that they not only fervently believe them but also can defend them against all comers are autonomous on

Westlund's account. This result is an accepted byproduct of establishing a formal account that makes no exceptions for people who have completely internalized values that actually undermine their own self-respect (37).

We would also have to include Clayton Bigsby, the character from Dave Chappelle's infamous skit featuring a blind white supremacist who doesn't know he is African American, as autonomous even after he learns his race. Bigsby has internalized white supremacy to the point of being able to write scores of books defending it. Upon learning he is not white, he cannot simply drop his internalization, which runs deep. Surely he will lose all of his self-respect, but still will be able to act in ways that fit with his internalized values, which he would remain fully able to defend.

Westlund follows the established line of thought of mainstream theorists that it is preferable to widen the scope of autonomy because a narrower conception may lead to less respectful interactions with greater numbers of non-autonomous agents (42). The idea is that autonomy is connected with deserving respect: if someone is not autonomous, they do not have a full claim to the kind of respectful treatment we owe autonomous agents. For example, there is no need to treat a person in a non-responsive comatose state who requires immediate surgery as autonomous. The surgery decision necessarily must be made without the kind of rational exchange that would be owed to an autonomous agent. We should still respect this person, but we need not treat him or her as we would treat an autonomous agent.

We should expand the scope as wide as possible if we thought doing so would strengthen requirements for respectful treatment. Yet, that is only one way to think about the relation between autonomy and respect. Substantive accounts of autonomy need not reserve respect only for the

autonomous, for whom they set a high bar. A simple fix is available: assign respect to the capability for autonomy and don't count as autonomous those agents whose core values are turned against them from without.

For example, unlike the comatose patient, there is nothing substantially preventing Clayton Bigsby from realizing his autonomy; Clayton Bigsby is capable of autonomy. Thus, we ought to respectfully attempt to show him the errors of his ways by appealing to his autonomous capabilities. We ought to do that since surely we want him to *autonomously* choose an autonomous lifestyle - a new lifestyle couldn't be autonomous if he didn't autonomously choose it. Were we to treat him in ways that didn't respect his autonomy (coercing him, brainwashing him, etc.), we would not be helping him become autonomous. It is only those that cannot achieve autonomy on their own, such as the comatose, that we can acceptably treat differently. Making respectful treatment conditional on the capability shows why we must treat the non-autonomous, who remain capable of change, in respectful ways: that is the only way to help them change autonomously.

Thus, a substantive account does not re-victimize the victims, as Westlund seems to think (43). Instead, it could allow us to properly pinpoint the victimization at stake. The severity of the harm done to these agents lies precisely in the fact that their deeply internalized values *prevent* the full achievement of their autonomy. Otherwise it is incredibly difficult to properly describe this harm. After all, the Taliban woman and Clayton Bigsby do not see themselves as harmed by their values, which they have internalized. The harm nonetheless lies in their values: there is some obscure - but external - process that is warping these agents' values such that the very basis for them respecting themselves is being undermined *by their own values*, which indicate that they are worth less as individuals due merely to their identities. It seems strange to

consider such agents as sufficiently in control over their lives to count as autonomous.

I am, of course, making substantial claims – but surely it is central to feminism and anti-racism that we can accept the wrongs of sexism and racism as objective facts. In particular, it makes sense to think there is something wrong with a putatively autonomous agent whose actions derive from values that undermine her very self-worth.

I have not here made an argument that we must accept a substantive autonomy account. I believe, though, that as feminists and anti-racism theorists, we need more convincing that we should be happy with a formal account, such as Westlund's. Of course, it was not Westlund's primary goal to convince us to accept a formal account, but only to show the compatibility of formal conditions with a relational account. Though I believe she succeeded on that end, I wonder whether some of our reasons for preferring relational accounts may have been lost in the process. While Mackenzie and Poltera succeeded in establishing that narrative theories of identity provide a wide enough scope to include almost all ordinary agents, I remain worried that we should not view autonomy's scope quite as widely.

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