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Autonomy or Authenticity?

Commentary on Andrea Westlund's 'Rethinking Relational Autonomy' and Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera's 'Narrative Integration, Fragmented Selves and Autonomy.'

NATALIE STOLJAR

Department of Philosophy
McGill University, Leacock Building
855 Sherbrooke St. W.
Montreal, Quebec H3A 2T7
natalie.stoljar@mcgill.ca

Andrea Westlund's 'Rethinking Relational Autonomy' and Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera's 'Narrative Integration, Fragmented Selves and Autonomy' have many overlapping themes. In what follows, I draw out one of the overlapping themes: both articles distinguish between the necessary conditions for 'identity' or cross-temporal agency and the necessary conditions for autonomy. I suggest that the distinction between identity and autonomy potentially challenges one of the orthodoxies in the autonomy literature, namely, that an autonomous agent is in effect an agent who exhibits authenticity.¹ Neither article endorses a distinction between authenticity and autonomy. On the contrary, both

assume that the orthodoxy is correct and hence that autonomy requires authenticity. I am suggesting that the distinction between autonomy and identity implicitly puts pressure on the orthodoxy even if it is not intended to do so.

Westlund's 'Rethinking Relational Autonomy' is a meticulous defense of what she calls a 'dialogical conception' of autonomy. This is a new position in the logical space of theories of autonomy. Westlund nicely summarizes the starting point in many discussions of autonomy: 'to act autonomously is to act on a desire (or value) that passes a test of reflective endorsement and thereby counts as truly one's own... [S]uch endorsement constitutes the agent's authorization of the desires by which she is moved. In the absence of such authorization, many philosophers speak of agents' being "gripped by" or "alienated from" their desires.' (2009, 30). She takes up Michael Bratman's account of reflective endorsement in which agents are self-governing with respect to their choices and actions when there is a higher-order 'self-governing policy' about that choice or action. According to Bratman, the reason that the self-governing policy itself is authorized in the right way, and not simply a higher-order attitude that the agent may also be gripped by or alienated from, is that these self-governing policies 'contribute to the organization of our cross-temporal agency,' and hence 'these policies have a claim to speak for the agent because they are among the psychological ties that constitute a person as one and the same agent over time' (Westlund 2009, 31-32). Suppose an agent adopts a policy about an exercise regime as a result of depression about her weight. For Bratman, despite the fact that the agent's depression is what ultimately drives her actions, she is nevertheless autonomous because the self-governing policy is a necessary component of a self across time and hence 'speaks for the self.'

Westlund responds that a distinction should be drawn between an agent's having a self-governing policy and an agent's autonomy. She suggests that intuitively our reaction to the depressed agent is: "That's the depression speaking, not you!" and hence that we are likely to characterize such agents as in 'in the grip of a reasoning-governing policy that is not one's own, regardless of the role played by that policy in organizing one's agency over time' (Westlund 2009, 33). Westlund also considers the case of 'deeply deferential agents,' who have a self-governing policy of deference to another but 'have no basis of for doing so that is not itself deferential' (Westlund 2009, 32). She argues that although the self-governing policy may play a role in constituting cross-temporal agency, it may still be autonomy undermining. The response to such agents parallels the response to the depressed agent described above: "That's so-and-so speaking, not you!" (Westlund 2009, 33).

Thus, for Westlund, having a higher-order policy (in Bratman's sense) that agents employ to critically reflect on their lower-order choices is not sufficient for autonomy. On her view, however, critical reflection does play a role. Westlund's position steers a course between the position that 'a choice or action may be regarded as autonomous just when it is motivated by a desire or value that has survived a suitably rigorous process of critical scrutiny' and the position that requires a 'merely hypothetical standard of critical reflection - for example, one that requires that a desire or value could or would withstand some idealized process of reflection' (Westlund 2009, 35-6). The former approach is too stringent in that it would require that every preference or desire pass a test of critical reflection to be autonomous, whereas the latter is too weak because it doesn't require agents to *actually* exercise critical reflection at all. Westlund herself offers a carefully worked-out a 'dialogical' account. She argues that autonomy is a disposition of an agent to 'hold herself answerable, for her action-guiding commitments, to

external critical perspectives' (Westlund 2009, 35). It is a disposition to respond to the normative challenges of real or imagined others. Neither the depressed person nor the deeply deferential person will have this disposition. The deeply deferential agent's response to justificatory challenges will not be dialogical because it will not be the case that 'more than one perspective is in play' (Westlund 2009, 36). Rather, in response to challenges, the agent will rehearse the perspective of the person to whom she defers without critical engagement of her own. Similarly, citing depression is also not 'holding herself answerable to external critical perspectives.' Both the depressed agent and the deeply deferential agent are, as Westlund puts it, 'impervious to critical challenge' (2009, 34).

There are two features of Westlund's dialogical account that make it a significantly original one. First, it is *constitutively* relational. For Westlund, a necessary condition of being autonomous is having a disposition that requires 'positioning oneself as always a potential member of a reflective or deliberative dyad' so that the psychological perspective of the autonomous agent '[points] beyond itself, to the position the agent occupies as one reflective, responsible self among many' (Westlund 2009, 35). Secondly, it is 'formal' (content-neutral) not substantive or value-laden; it does not require an agent to endorse or reject any particular justification of their reasons for choice and action. Hence, Westlund's article provides a counterargument to John Christman's critique of constitutively relational accounts, namely that they imply an unacceptable perfectionism, or a requirement that the agent endorse (or the external conditions correspond to) some substantive moral position (Christman 2004; Christman 2010).

The article by Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera is a rich and very rewarding exploration of the conditions of agency and the consequences of this for autonomy. The distinction mentioned by Westlund between the conditions of cross-

temporal agency and the conditions of autonomy has an important place in their argument. The first part of the article critiques Galen Strawson's proposal that an 'Episodic self' is a candidate for agency. Employing an analysis of Elyn Saks' memoir of living with schizophrenia, Mackenzie and Poltera propose that Saks' description of periods in which she was severely ill with psychotic delusions, in which she experienced a disorganized and fragmented sense of self, shows that Episodic identity is not sufficient for genuine agency. Rather, they argue that having a temporally extended *narrative* identity is necessary and sufficient for agency. The second part of their article critiques Marya Schechtman's account of narrative agency. Mackenzie and Poltera claim that Schechtman 'blurs the distinction between identity and autonomy' and that the constraints she imposes on narrative identity are too strong (2010, 45 ff.). They propose a conception of narrative identity with modified constraints. First, they adopt a 'reality' constraint that is weaker than Schechtman's. Schechtman's reality constraint is violated, for example, when the contents of an agent's thoughts do not correspond to reality. Psychotic agents therefore do not have narrative identity because their thoughts violate the reality constraint. Mackenzie and Poltera respond by making a useful distinction between the contents of psychotic thoughts and the 'illness narrative' of psychotic agents. They argue that it is possible for an illness narrative that corresponds to reality to be incorporated into an agent's self-conception; indeed, 'the illness narratives of persons such as Saks who suffer from psychopathology can be self-constituting despite their fragmentation if they enable the person to make sense of her history, rather than being caught in a terrifying "stagnant present"' (2010, 50). Mackenzie and Poltera also reject Schechtman's account of narrative agency as 'it places overly restrictive requirements of coherence, affective identification, and self-knowledge on self-constituting narratives' (2010, 48). They propose that an agent's sense of self may contain overlapping, even conflicting, fragments, yet may still

comprise a self-narrative that forms the basis of a flourishing life.

This 'looser conception of narrative self-constitution' allows Mackenzie and Poltera to distinguish between identity or agency - the synchronic and diachronic conditions of selfhood - and autonomy (Mackenzie and Poltera 2010, 47). They argue that Saks suffers from diminished autonomy whereas her narrative identity is intact. They outline two broad sets of conditions required for autonomy: competency and authenticity conditions. The former include capacities for 'rationality, capacities for self-control, and motivational effectiveness' and the latter 'specify that, to be autonomous, an agent's desires, beliefs, commitments, and values must be her own, which requires that she has critically evaluated them in some way' (Mackenzie and Poltera 2010, 48). (Mackenzie and Poltera endorse a relational account of these two conditions, though they do not specify precisely the way in which the relational conditions are to be understood.) Mackenzie and Poltera argue that both Saks' autonomy competency - especially her capacity for 'programmatically autonomy,' that is, the capacity to make life-choices such as whether and whom to marry - and her authenticity are diminished as a result of her experience of psychotic illness.

Each article makes a persuasive case that the conditions of cross-temporal agency are different - perhaps less stringent - from the conditions of autonomy. Mackenzie and Poltera point out that 'illness narratives' play an important role in agents' self-conceptions over time while at the same time the illness experienced by the agent may be precisely the feature of her psychology that undermines her autonomy. This observation makes me wonder whether different kinds of narratives of identity have the same role in cross-temporal agency and also the same consequences for agents' autonomy. For example, gender and race narratives play a similar role in constituting cross-temporal agency. Does the

way in which agents experience gender and race have the potential to undermine their autonomy in the same way that the experience of psychotic illness has this potential? Theorists of oppression have pointed out that the ideologies of gender and race can have a debilitating effect on the psychologies of agents who are oppressed and hence on their competencies.

A second question for Mackenzie and Poltera's account arises for their claim that narrative identity is necessary for autonomy (although it is not sufficient). How does this claim intersect with their reality constraint? Recall that they draw a distinction for the purposes of modifying Schechtman's reality constraint between the illness narrative and content of the illness narrative. In certain cases, however, it may be difficult for agents to draw a sharp distinction between incorporating the narrative into their self-conception and incorporating the contents of the narrative. Again I am thinking of gender and race narratives such as 'I am a black woman.' It may be impossible to distinguish the race narrative from its contents because race narratives seem to *imply* beliefs with certain contents such as 'I am inferior to white people' or 'White people think of me as inferior,' or 'I am naturally suited to certain inferior positions or roles in society.' Since the contents of these beliefs are false, does the narrative violate the reality constraint? If it does, since for Mackenzie and Poltera narrative identity is a necessary condition of autonomy, agents have neither narrative identity nor autonomy. Does the reality constraint on narrative identity therefore potentially import a substantive constraint into Mackenzie and Poltera's conception of autonomy?²

Thirdly, although Mackenzie and Poltera's claim that authenticity is one of the conditions of autonomy, their discussion suggests that authenticity may in fact come apart from autonomy (cf. Oshana 2005; Oshana 2007). On their account, the illness narrative - 'I am a person with

schizophrenia' - contributes to how Saks constitutes her sense of self, even during periods in which she is relatively well. So, for instance, having intrusive thoughts is part of who she is as a person with schizophrenia; these thoughts are central and ineliminable features of Saks' self, and therefore authentically her *own*, in some sense (cf. Oshana 2005, 88-90). However, for Mackenzie and Poltera, these aspects of the self are *inauthentic* in agents like Saks, because 'there will always be significant aspects of the [schizophrenic] person's self... from which she may always feel alienated,' and as a result of which she has diminished autonomy. How do Mackenzie and Poltera reconcile the apparently incompatible claims that illness narratives contribute to the constitution of a self that is an agent's 'own' and the claim that at the same time these aspects of the authentic self are inauthentic and hence undermine autonomy?

The question of the relationship between authenticity and autonomy also arises for Westlund's article. She wants to allow that agents who adopt practices that significantly inhibit their equality may do so autonomously. She comments that if a 'fundamentalist woman does freely and authentically accept a condition of social and personal subordination, it seems...problematic to assume that her condition as subordinate, in and of itself, undermines her status as a self-governing agent' (Westlund 2009, 29). She distinguishes between two (hypothetical) fundamentalist women, both of whom accept their condition of subordination but only one of whom 'is prepared to take up and respond to the critical perspectives of others, even if she is unconvinced by their arguments' (Westlund 2009, 29). The latter exhibits dialogical autonomy whereas the former does not. It is clear that, for Westlund, authenticity and autonomy go together. However, in my view, it is implausible that the difference between the two women can be located in a difference in their authentic selves: both treat being a fundamentalist Muslim woman as constitutive of their sense of self and essential to 'who they

are.' Both (*ex hypothesi*) endorse their commitments to fundamentalism and the condition of subordination that goes along with it. The only difference between the two is that one can (or does) justify her commitments to others whereas the other can (or does) not. It seems therefore that Westlund's account implicitly also puts pressure on the authenticity criterion of autonomy.

Two final considerations stem from Westlund's use of the notion of a disposition. The autonomy disposition will be manifested only if the agent is subject to the normative challenges of others and has the opportunity to respond to them. However, in many situations in which agents are subject to oppressive ideologies, there will be little if any opportunity to respond to justificatory challenges. A disposition that is never manifested suffers from the same objection that Westlund addressed to hypothetical accounts, namely that, in the absence of normative challenges from other agents, critical reflection will not be engaged at all. Suppose an agent is never in a position to respond to justificatory challenges. Is Westlund's view that she is autonomous because her disposition *would* be manifested *were* she subjected to challenges? Or is the view rather that only agents who have the opportunity to respond to normative challenges, and in fact do so, are autonomous? A related question is how the disposition required for autonomy would develop for agents who are subject to oppressive circumstances. Dispositions to respond to others' requests for justification of one's own reasons are honed through education, open debate, and being subjected to a wide variety of real and imagined perspectives that challenge one's own. It is plausible that agents living in social conditions of significant inequality, for instance those in which girls are not entitled to education, will not encounter the circumstances necessary for the disposition to develop. Thus, although Westlund characterizes her position as adopting a weaker criterion of autonomy than those requiring

that preferences be subjected to reflective endorsement, for many agents, dialogical autonomy may actually be more stringent and difficult to achieve.

To sum up: both articles make important advances in our thinking about the notion of autonomy. By carefully distinguishing between the conditions of identity or cross-temporal agency and the conditions of autonomy, they point towards the possibility of a richer exploration of the ways in which conditions that contribute to the construction of agents' identities might at the same time undermine agents' capacities for autonomy. I suggested that the self yielded by a process of identity-construction is equivalent to an authentic self. Thus, the idea that the former may not be autonomous implicitly challenges the orthodoxy of the autonomy literature that authenticity and autonomy go together.

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¹ Marina Oshana's work challenges this orthodoxy (e.g. Oshana 2005; Oshana 2007).

²As Sally Haslanger pointed out to me, the identity narratives that people construct for themselves may be more or less true. What degree of truth is required to satisfy the reality constraint?