

Gender Inequality, Non-sovereign Agency, and the Plurality of Political Freedom¹

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Gender equality has advanced markedly in the last fifty years or so, particularly in countries with political constitutions that incorporate human rights or otherwise instantiate the principles of liberty and equality for all. Not all countries are committed to gender equality in a formal way, of course, and where such commitment is lacking at the institutional level gender inequality tends to be more pronounced. Yet even in advanced societies that formally establish equal rights, gender-based inequalities persist, and they continue to undermine freedom. The persistence of gender inequality despite the presence of equal rights and a public commitment to equal liberty is one of several paradoxes of freedom that are distinctive to contemporary life in ostensibly free, democratic societies. In the U.S., for instance, women still earn on average 20% less than men do, and their opportunities to achieve remain inhibited by deeply asymmetrical burdens of domestic labor and by gender-differentiated expectations of men and women in virtually every aspect of life. The U.S. is not alone in this regard. These same dynamics are in play in many contemporary societies. Women's freedom today is complex even in advanced democracies: we are at once free and unfree, in ways that are multiple and often conflicting.

The dominant theories of freedom in political theory today are not especially helpful in illuminating this complexity. To fully appreciate it, must look beyond the formal liberties and equalities established in law to the more subtle dynamics that characterize informal interpersonal interactions. These dynamics tend to be overlooked in mainstream political theory, and they are often unseen or unacknowledged in public life. Yet their effects on freedom are powerful. Feminist theory has historically been more adept at theorizing freedom in ways that go beyond official, legally sanctioned norms and practices. Yet feminist theory has for the most part failed to acknowledge two factors that are crucial to understanding gender-based failures of freedom today. The first factor concerns the nature of human agency. Contrary to common assumptions, agency is not an exclusively internal property of the individual and not solely a function of the individual will. Instead, individual agency is a socially distributed phenomenon, a potent but “non-sovereign” experience, to use language introduced by Hannah Arendt. The second important factor is that freedom is a plural phenomenon. The experiences we have of freedom come in different forms, and sometimes the different forms of freedom that we have, or that we seek, conflict with one another. Freedom is not one thing.

To theorize freedom in non-sovereign and plural terms cuts against conventional narratives about freedom in political theory, including feminist theory. Yet doing so is the best way to make sense of the complexity of freedom that women experience – and the only way to make real progress in advancing freedom. Understanding the non-sovereign and plural nature of freedom is an important step in addressing other social inequalities as well. Indeed, it presses us to think about freedom in fundamentally new ways, with important implications for all those who are marginalized in any society. Part one of the paper explicates the notion of non-sovereign agency, situating it in relation to contemporary feminist work on freedom and showing how it helps illuminate the often subtle ways that gender inequality compromises freedom. Part two explores the plurality of political freedom, highlighting four different forms of freedom and demonstrating how the plural character of freedom helps us understand women's complex, sometimes paradoxical, experiences today.

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Non-sovereign agency and social inequality

Political freedom in the most general sense refers to the social and political conditions that make the exercise of human agency possible. Although agency has traditionally been associated with rational autonomy and located in the exercise of the individual will, thus equating agency with personal choice or control over one's action, recent work has productively challenged this view. Agency is neither reducible to the experience of control nor located exclusively within the individual; it is a potent but *non-sovereign* experience, as Arendt put it (Arendt 1958, 234-6; see also Zerilli 2005).² The view of human agency developed here is inspired by Arendt in distinguishing agency from control, and in treating agency as a socially distributed phenomenon rather than an exclusively internal faculty of the individual, although it departs from Arendt in key respects (Krause 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015). Agency on this view refers to the affirmation of one's subjective existence, or personal identity, through concrete action in the world. To be an agent is to affect the world in ways that concretely manifest who you are, to see yourself and be seen by others in the effects you have, to recognize your deeds as being in some sense your own. Understood this way, agency arises at the interface of identity and efficacy. Without a reflexive sense of self that is antecedent to any given action, one cannot have the experience of seeing herself in her deed. Hence there is no agency without personal identity.³ By the same token, there can be no agency without effects. Agency, in contrast to mere willing (or dreaming), involves actually doing things, having an impact on the world. Part of what makes agency non-sovereign is that many of the effects we have are themselves affected by the social interpretations given to our actions by others and by the responses these interpretations elicit. What we can accomplish in any particular instance depends in some measure on what other people think we are doing and on how they respond to our initiatives. Individual agency requires social uptake.

As Arendt put it, there are "two parts" to any action, "the beginning made by a single person and the achievement in which many join by 'bearing' and 'finishing' the enterprise, by seeing it through" (Arendt 1958, 189). Action's first moment involves individual initiative, an exertion of the human

² Other non-sovereign accounts of agency (not all of them Arendtian) can be found in Markell 2003; Bennett 2005; Coole 2005; and Frost 2008.

³ It is worth emphasizing here that while the selfhood that figures in agency is robust, it should not be understood as singular or fixed or essential. Every self is something of a plurality containing multiple strands, some of which may sit uneasily with one another. Moreover, because we exist in dynamic relationship with our social and material environments, we are all subject to change. None of us remains perfectly identical over time. And because our characters evolve in connection with our changing circumstances, it would be wrong to think that any particular feature of our subjective existence constitutes an *a priori* essence. Even our most intransigent qualities take on shifting significance for who we are as our lives unfold because how these qualities figure in the constitution of our subjectivity depends partly on how the social and material contexts shape our experience of them. Finally, the self's transformation over time is itself a part of agency because we sometimes become new to ourselves in important ways as a result of what we do. In this respect, subjectivity or selfhood has a plural, open-ended quality.

The distinct selfhood that each of us has, which contains multiple strands and is always evolving but which is generally recognizable to ourselves and others as *ours* is what I mean by subjective existence, or selfhood, or personal identity. To define agency in terms of the affirmation of one's subjective existence implies that there is indeed something to be affirmed through one's actions, a self (however complex and evolving) that precedes any particular deed. It also implies a subject with sufficient reflexivity to be capable of recognizing herself in her actions and effects. Experientially speaking, this reflexive sense of self is crucial. Without it, the common experience that we all have of being agents, of seeing that the world is different because of something that we in particular have done, would be impossible. The reflexive self is not the sole source of agency, but it is an important part of the picture. The importance within agency of an individuated, enduring, and reflexive self distinguishes my view from that of Arendt and others who theorize the non-sovereignty of human agency. See, for example, Markell 2003; Bennett 2005; Coole 2005; and Zerilli 2005.

capacity to begin that also reveals the distinctive identity of the agent. Yet if action needs individual initiative and involves the disclosure of individual identity, action “is never possible in isolation” but “needs the presence of others” (188). Other people are needed as “co-actors” (189) who participate with the agent in “the actual achievement” of her “enterprise” or objective (190), at least in the public or political sphere.⁴ Just as a leader’s initiatives depend for their success on the support of his followers, “without whose help he would never be able to achieve anything,” so the enterprises of any individual regularly require a community of bearers to help bring them to fruition (190). To act in social and political life is to insert ourselves into an already existing web of human relationships. Although to count as action our effort must involve “beginning something new on our own initiative,” we often cannot make good on our initiatives by ourselves (177). What we initiate inevitably falls onto a field of social meaning and “innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions” (184). The background of social meaning and the wills and intentions of others affect how *we* affect the world; they shape the unfolding narrative of enterprises and effects that constitutes the story of what we have done.

The efficacy dimension of agency, in other words, is subject to the contingencies of social interpretation and uptake. What we can accomplish through any particular deed depends significantly on how others interpret its meaning and respond. The familiar double bind that faces women in positions of (non-domestic) authority is a case in point. On the one hand, to be effective in authoritative positions requires acting with confidence, courage, conviction. Against the background of a patriarchal culture’s norms of femininity, however, such action is likely to be interpreted in ways that undermine a woman’s efficacy – as nasty, or demanding, or domineering. On the other hand, conforming to traditional norms of femininity requires manifesting qualities, such as deference and timidity, that make it impossible for people to see her as authoritative, and therefore undercut her agency from the other direction. This double bind has been the focus of much feminist analysis over the years. It is an indication of the socially distributed nature of individual agency, its non-sovereign character.⁵ Agency is an emergent property of the communicative exchanges, background meanings, social interpretations, personal intentions, self-understandings, and even bodily encounters through which one’s identity comes to be manifest in one’s deeds.

This way of conceiving agency connects up with important insights from the feminist literature but also makes some departures. Insofar as agency is socially distributed, it will be subject to some of the

⁴ Arendt discusses non-sovereignty in the context of her treatment of action as a particular form of activity (distinguished from labor and work), but it is reasonable to think that non-sovereignty covers a wider range of activities than those associated exclusively with action in the technical sense. In fact, she acknowledges that non-sovereignty is “characteristic not of political action alone, in the narrower sense of the word,” where it refers to great action in the public realm (Arendt 1958, 190). It also covers even “the smallest act in the most limited circumstances” because “one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation” (190). Non-sovereignty is a general feature of the human condition, deriving from the fact that our “natality,” or capacity to begin, can only be enacted in the presence of plurality, the fact that “men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world” (7). Thus Arendt can speak of “human non-sovereignty” in a way that applies to human agency in general. It conveys the idea that individual action in a nontechnical sense has a socially distributed character, and therefore is neither a strictly internal faculty nor fully controlled by the individual will.

It is also worth noting that not all human actions transpire in the public sphere, and not all require social uptake to have effects. I can flip on a light switch while standing alone in a room and not depend on anyone else for the achievement of the action. Because we do commonly have the experience of affecting the world outside the public realm in ways that are independent of the responses of others, we often overestimate our ability to do so in public contexts.

⁵ The term “distributed agency” comes from the literature on Actor Network Theory. See especially Latour 2005; Knappett and Malafouris 2010; and Law and Hassard 1999. The focus of those works is on the ways that human agency is distributed in the material world; my emphasis here is on the ways in which individual agency is distributed in the social world.

same dynamics of intersectionality that feminists have shown to shape individual identities (Crenshaw 1989; Hill-Collins 2005; Alcoff 2006; Anzaldúa 2007; Mohanty 2003; Beltran 2010; Ackerly and Attanasi 2009; Love 2007). How others interpret and respond to our actions, and hence the effects we have on the world, will vary with the different degrees and kinds of social uptake that are available to us, which themselves will vary with the multiple, intersecting strands of our identities. Systematic social inequalities tend to disrupt social uptake, disabling individual agency and compromising freedom in patterned ways for members of marginalized groups, including women. Yet because identities are intersectional, any one individual's agency will be subject to multiple dynamics of uptake, vulnerable to diverse failures but also potent in sometimes unexpected (and sometimes undesirable) ways.

The non-sovereignty of human agency also bears an important affinity to feminist work on the social construction of identity and the idea of “relational autonomy.”⁶ Any viable theory of human agency must acknowledge the fact that our identities are importantly shaped by social context. The subjective existence that figures so importantly in the experience of individual agency is not a wholly self-generated existence. This is another way in which agency is non-sovereign: We do not fully control the selves that we become. Still, the non-sovereign approach to agency goes beyond the social construction of identity thesis. The social construction of identity is about how we came to be who we are. By contrast, the idea of socially distributed agency is about how who we are (however we came to be that) is manifest in (or fails to be manifest in) what we do, in the effects we have. It sees the exercise of agency as involving the interaction of subjective and intersubjective sources. It conceives individual agency as a relational experience rather than an inner faculty. Non-sovereign agency goes beyond the notion of relational autonomy as well. When feminist theorists invoke this notion they generally refer to the intersubjective conditions that facilitate the development of autonomy as an inner faculty of the individual involving personal choice and control, or self-determination. The relational autonomy literature investigates how relationships support the kind of psychological development that issues in an autonomous person, conventionally conceived. Insofar as it valorizes self-determination and treats autonomy as an inner psychological capacity, the relational autonomy literature stops short of the more radical view embodied in the notion of non-sovereign agency as a socially distributed phenomenon.⁷

In view of the non-sovereignty of human agency, social inequality affects agency on both its dimensions – on the efficacy side and on the identity side. On the efficacy side, inequalities can disrupt the social interpretation of action and the social uptake needed to sustain it. Prejudice and stereotyping blind us to the distinctive individualities of others. As a result, they undercut the ability of those who are marginalized to affirm their identities in their deeds, and so can cause systematic and unjust failures of agency. When a marginalized individual acts onto a field of social meaning colored by bias, the result is likely to be effects that are at odds with her intentions, and intentions that fail to generate effects. This experience is familiar to racial and ethnic minorities in societies marked by social inequality, and to many women in societies with residual patriarchy. It involves subtle dynamics of social uptake and non-uptake that powerfully affect our impact on the world. If social inequality undercuts the efficacy dimension of agency, it also can make trouble on the identity side. A background of social inequality may produce identities that are debilitated by a sense of worthlessness or riven by internal conflict of the sort that

⁶ Nancy Hirschmann's *The Subject of Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) richly theorizes the conditions for freedom, given the social construction of identity. On relational autonomy, see Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law's Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Catriona MacKenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁷ Friedman notes that feminist theories of relational autonomy “tend to regard social relationships merely as causal conditions promoting autonomy but do not construe autonomy itself as inherently social.” Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, 97. While Friedman is also not inclined to treat autonomy as inherently social, she does think the issue calls for further discussion (note 73).

Sandra Bartky describes as psychological “fragmentation” or W.E.B. DuBois called “double consciousness.”⁸ Fragmentation and double consciousness follow from the effort to fit oneself and one’s actions into a biased normative framework that is at odds with key aspects of who one is. In extreme cases, social subordination can even impede the development of any distinctive sense of self. Consider Toni Morrison’s poignant description of the American slave woman, Sethe, in Morrison’s novel *Beloved*:

... the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home. Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like.⁹

Here the experience of affirming one’s subjective existence through action is elusive because the individual’s subjective existence is so troubled and uncertain. If who she is constitutes a painful puzzle for her, it will be difficult for her to identify with any particular action as her own, as a manifestation of who she distinctly is.¹⁰

So human agency is a non-sovereign experience. It is a socially distributed phenomenon rather than an exclusively internal property of the person. Although it involves the exercise of will, it cannot be reduced to personal control over one’s action because agency regularly depends on social uptake. This dependence makes agency vulnerable in deep ways to social inequality, which disrupts social uptake for those who are marginalized. The non-sovereignty of agency resonates with feminist work on intersectionality, relational autonomy, and the social construction of identity, but it goes beyond these ideas as well. Insofar as agency is non-sovereign, formal political liberties will not be sufficient to establish freedom. Informal relations of respect and recognition are also needed to provide the social uptake agency requires. The paradoxes of freedom experienced by many women in ostensibly free societies today derive partly from the fact that social uptake for their agency is incomplete, despite the presence of equal rights. Another factor in this experience is the plural character of freedom itself, as we are about to see.

⁸ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 1989), 3; Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 32.

⁹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Random House, [1987] 2004), 165.

¹⁰ It sometimes happens that social contexts of inequality generate identities that are well defined and relatively free of conflict. Women who grow up in highly traditionalist patriarchal societies and who occupy roles with a subordinate status but who experience no sense of fragmentation or impoverishment, who are not plagued by double consciousness but feel at home in their identities, can indeed have the experience of affirming their subjective existence through concrete action in the world. They can be agents. Their identities may include what Wendy Brown has called “wounded attachments,” but this fact need not preclude the possibility of agency. Still, to the extent that the identities they feel at home in rest on a worldview that devalues women or limits their life chances relative to those of men, we have principled grounds to criticize those identities, and we should acknowledge that freedom in such cases is incomplete. See Wendy Brown, “Wounded Attachments,” *Political Theory* 21 (3): 390-410; and *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 85f. See also Nancy Hirschmann on adaptive preferences, *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 111, 114.

It is also worth emphasizing that while agency is a socially distributed phenomenon, it is never in a strict sense socially determined. In particular, it is always more than the simple product of prevailing relations of power. The agency of the marginalized regularly surprises us with its vitality. I have explored the vitality of human agency under conditions of domination and oppression elsewhere (Krause 2015, ch 4).

Freedom's plurality

If freedom refers to the enabling conditions of human agency, to be free is to live among others in such a way that the possibility of affirming one's identity in one's deeds is generally open, or not systematically foreclosed. Each of us will be both free and unfree as our agency is considered along multiple dimensions, or seen from the standpoint of different aspects of our identities with the different trajectories of social uptake they make possible or disallow, given the prevailing background of cultural norms, meanings, and biases. Moreover, we will be free and unfree in qualitatively different kinds of ways. The meaning of freedom will vary with respect to the diverse conditions that sustain agency. No one account of freedom will fully capture all these conditions.

Freedom as non-interference. For instance, because agency is a socially distributed phenomenon and not simply an interior function of the individual will, the ideal of "negative liberty" as non-interference will be important but incomplete. As introduced by Isaiah Berlin and developed by others, negative liberty enables agency by providing opportunities for action, mainly through civil liberties and the institutions of limited government that protect individual choice. Berlin emphasized that non-interference consists only in "the opportunity to act, not the action itself" (Berlin 1990, xliii). What matters from the standpoint of non-interference is that doors be open to me, so to speak; whether or not I actually walk through these doors is irrelevant to my freedom. Yet to characterize freedom strictly as an "opportunity concept"¹¹ is problematic once the socially distributed character of human agency is understood. Berlin's free agent, poised in that open doorway, already has what he needs to walk through it because his agency is a naturally occurring, internal property located in his individual will. If I carry my agency inside me, then every open door is indeed the opportunity that Berlin conceives it to be. If instead agency is socially distributed, then these opportunities will be illusory, at least for those who are on the losing end of social inequality. For an open door will only constitute an opportunity to act if there are bearers for one's action on the other side, people whose understanding of the action and responses to it help sustain its efficacy. It is one thing if I have the capacity to walk through the door but fail to do so because of some character-based (or other) weakness on my own part. It is something else entirely if I lack the capacity to walk through the door because of entrenched patterns of inequality that systematically undermine the exercise of agency for me and others like me. Where agency is conceived strictly as a function of individual will, as in negative liberty, this problem never arises – or rather, the problem remains invisible.

Where the meaning of one's action is interpreted through the lens of bias and stereotypes, as we have seen, others will understand what one is doing with reference to what they expect of one's type, instead of in terms that are receptive to one's distinctive identity and one's own understanding of the action. Against this background of inequality, the link between one's identity and one's effects, which sustains the experience of agency, is bound to be disrupted. A woman who thinks she is conveying her opinion in a direct, straightforward manner to her colleagues at work but who is interpreted by them as antagonistic because her manner fails to comport with norms of feminine deference experiences precisely this disruption and the failure of agency that accompanies it. Such experiences are common among the marginalized and the subordinate. They involve subtle dynamics of social uptake and non-uptake that powerfully affect individual agency in ways that are informal, often invisible, and very difficult to articulate. Freedom as non-interference cannot by itself remediate these systematic failures of agency. It is true that interference by the state and by other individuals and groups can impede agency and hamper freedom. It would be impossible for us to affirm our identities in our deeds if we were constantly being interfered with by others or the state. Berlin is right to say that freedom requires principled constraints on political power (Berlin 1990, 163, 166), and right to insist on the importance of a protected realm for individual action. Yet it is wrong to think that "the freedom of a society" can be adequately "measured by

¹¹ The distinction between an opportunity concept and an exercise concept, as applied to freedom, was introduced by Charles Taylor (1979).

the strength of these barriers” alone (Berlin 1990, 166).¹² The ideal of non-interference is a valuable principle for ordering social and political life, but only up to a point and not on its own.

Freedom as non-domination. Nor is the republican ideal of non-domination sufficient. In contrast to non-interference, the principle of non-domination protects not just against actual interference but also against relationships in which certain people have the power to interfere arbitrarily in the choices of others even if they do not actually exercise this power (Pettit 2000). There is no doubt that domination undercuts freedom. It clearly stands in the way of the individual’s ability to affirm her identity in her deeds. The paradigm case of domination is slavery, in which one person functions as the tool of another’s will. Under domination, one’s actions reflect her master’s subjective existence rather than her own. For this reason, the ideal of non-domination, like that of non-interference, is crucial to individual freedom. Yet the relationship of personal control that is fundamental to domination is often missing from contexts that nevertheless constrain the exercise of individual agency and hinder freedom. Moreover, many of the social dynamics that systematically undercut agency for those who are marginalized operate without the conscious awareness of participants. By contrast, domination is characteristically a matter of “common knowledge” in the sense that “domination is generally going to involve the awareness of control on the part of the powerful, the awareness of vulnerability on the part of the powerless, and the mutual awareness – indeed, the common awareness among all the parties to the relationship – of this consciousness on each side” (Pettit 2000, 60). Many failures of freedom today transpire in the absence of both personal control and conscious awareness. This is true of the failures that track both gender-based and race- or ethnicity-based inequalities.

The danger of excluding impersonal, unconscious social factors from the category of domination – where domination is the supreme political value and the “only yardstick” of our institutions (Pettit 2000, 80) – is that we will fail to recognize the serious threats they pose.¹³ Recall that one of the advantages claimed for the theory of freedom as non-domination over the theory of freedom as non-interference is that it covers a wider range of obstacles to freedom. Specifically, the non-interference model recognizes only actual interference as jeopardizing freedom, whereas non-domination also covers cases in which the capacity for arbitrary interference, even when unexercised, undercuts the freedom of subordinates by making them live at the mercy of the dominant (Pettit 2000, 64), bowing and cringing and “unable to look the powerful in the eye” (60-1). From the non-interference perspective, the slave of a benevolent (or non-interfering) master has no legitimate complaint. The non-domination view, by contrast, clearly justifies his complaint, and this is surely an advantage. Yet non-domination is also limited in the range of threats to freedom that it covers. If we treat non-domination as the sole yardstick of our institutions, we blind ourselves to a wide range of very powerful threats to freedom. The informal cultural background that sustains sexism in many ostensibly free societies today is rife with such threats, but it operates without much conscious awareness and without necessarily involving relationships of personal control.

Freedom as non-oppression. To more fully comprehend freedom in light of the non-sovereignty of human agency we might usefully distinguish interference and domination from oppression, where the latter refers to impersonal social and political conditions that systematically and unjustly impede agency

¹² Berlin himself did not actually believe that the freedom of a society could be measured solely on the basis of its instantiation of negative liberty. He saw real merit in the countervailing ideal of freedom that he called “positive liberty,” and insisted that positive and negative liberty both had “an equal right to be classed among the deepest interests of mankind” (Berlin 1990, 166). The point here is that negative liberty models freedom in a limited way. Berlin saw these limits better than many of those who have since appropriated the model. At the same time, however, the reasons Berlin articulated for thinking that negative liberty was insufficient did not include recognition of the non-sovereign character of individual agency as that idea is developed in this paper.

¹³ For a different critique of Pettit, but one that also points to the limits of non-domination as a political ideal, see Markell 2008.

on the part of certain people.¹⁴ In contrast to domination, which can be exercised by one individual over another, oppression is an intrinsically collective phenomenon in that it applies to individuals only in view of their membership in a particular group. The harm that comes from oppression harms the individual not the group – or at least the harms to freedom with which we are concerned here are harms to individuals rather than groups – but the harm happens to the individual because of his or her perceived membership in some group.¹⁵ Another difference between oppression and domination is that whereas domination requires personal control and generally involves conscious awareness, oppression rests on impersonal patterns of privilege and prejudice, on dynamics that many people never see and that do not involve personal control over subjected persons. Oppression usually operates unintentionally and unconsciously, and there is never a single identifiable agent at its source. It works through biased social norms and internalized stereotypes to confine the oppressed individual within boundaries that suffocate and disfigure, systematically undercutting her ability to be in and affect the world in ways that manifest her distinctive individuality fully and authentically.

Oppression often coexists with domination, of course. Women in patriarchal societies may be dependent on men in ways that make them vulnerable to arbitrary power in the form of domination, but patriarchal cultural norms also tend to privilege traditionally male perspectives and characteristics while devaluing the putative feminine in ways that make the exercise of individual agency additionally problematic for women. Likewise, historical systems of racialized slavery in places such as the U.S. clearly manifested both, as African Americans were subject to the arbitrary personal control of slave masters as well as to impersonal social conditions that were disabling, such as racial stigma and prejudice. Although domination and oppression may coexist, however, it is important to distinguish them from one another. Otherwise, we run the risk of blinding ourselves to important failures of freedom. The danger of subsuming oppression under the category of domination, for instance, is that once overt practices of domination have been suspended we may wrongly believe that freedom is fully established, even as oppression continues to exist. The result will be precisely the kinds of “enduring injustice” (Spinner-Halev 2012) that informally compromise the freedom of women in societies that formally establish liberty for all.

Experientially, freedom as non-oppression involves the ability to manifest through action one’s distinctive subjectivity fully not just partially, and in a way that is untroubled by inequalities of power and internalized stereotypes. Freedom so conceived especially targets inequalities that are systematic and unjust. As such, it is compatible with some failures of agency. The full instantiation of one’s identity in one’s deeds may be interrupted by myriad factors, not all of which meet the criteria for oppression. Innumerable contingencies can intervene to prevent us from affirming our identities fully in our actions.

¹⁴ For present purposes, I include economic factors in political conditions, since most of those that influence individual agency are subject, however indirectly, to political decision-making, the policy choices made by political authorities for the regulation (or not) of economic actors.

Iris Young distinguished between domination and oppression, and I follow her lead in using these terms to mark out different sorts of violation. My own understanding of what the two terms cover is different from hers, however. She treats domination as involving constraints on “self-determination” and oppression as involving constraints on “self-development” (Young 1990, 37). Given the non-sovereign notion of human agency that forms the background of my account, the ideal of “self-determination,” at least in the strict sense of the term, is problematic. And my own view of freedom as non-oppression does not privilege self-development over self-expression. The affirmation of one’s subjective existence through concrete action in the world *can* involve the formative development of the self but it need not do so for freedom to be in play.

¹⁵ We must be mindful of the distinction between recognizing as a descriptive matter the important effects that group-based memberships can have on individual agency, on the one hand, and insisting as a normative matter that group-based identities are intrinsically valuable and worthy of special protections, on the other. I mean to argue for the first point but not to defend the second point. The ideal of non-oppression takes no stand on the intrinsic value of groups, and there is no notion of collective desert or group entitlement that follows from this ideal.

A debilitating disease or a natural disaster may undermine my agency, for instance, or my own natural tendency toward sloth may stand in the way of my doing and being all that I could. The plurality of the human condition also may impede the exercise of agency in ways that do not involve injustice. The inevitable differences among human beings make it easy for us to misunderstand one another and can obstruct social uptake. Such factors do not constitute oppression if they do not result from patterns of social interaction that perpetuate unfair inequalities. Some diseases affect poor or marginalized persons disproportionately, of course, and an ostensibly slothful character may be connected to the residual effects of social marginalization. So even seemingly natural effects on agency sometimes have a social or political component that brings them into the domain of oppression and calls for critical scrutiny. Yet not every instance of failed agency constitutes a violation of freedom that requires remediation. Freedom as non-oppression targets patterns of social exchange that systematically and unfairly undermine individual agency for particular categories of persons. In this respect, the ideal of freedom as non-oppression implicitly leans on justice.¹⁶

Thus if agency is the affirmation of one's subjective existence through concrete action in the world, there will be multiple ways for agency to fail, and hence multiple ways for us to be unfree. First, one's range of opportunity and personal choice may be impeded by the interference of others, including individuals, groups, and governments. Secondly, one's action may consciously be made to manifest someone else's subjective existence rather than one's own, as in the case of domination, in which one lives under the conscious personal control of another, and one's activity reflects that person's identity or purposes instead of one's own. A third form of unfreedom will arise when, without being interfered with directly and without being subject to any particular agent's control, one's action fails to manifest her subjective existence as a result of impersonal, unjust inequalities that systematically undercut social uptake and disrupt personal identity. Freedom fails in this sense when one's efficacy is thwarted by misrecognition or by an identity that is internally fragmented and disabled by the force of bigotry and internalized stereotypes.¹⁷ Oppression includes a wide range of pervasive social dynamics that subtly, informally, and without much conscious awareness compromise the agency of the marginalized. Taken together, these considerations suggest that we have reason to care about freedom in multiple forms, as non-interference, non-domination, and non-oppression.

Freedom as collective world-making. Another important way of understanding freedom centers on the Arendtian ideal of action in concert that aims at public ends and brings new political forms into being. Arendt defined political freedom as "participation in public affairs" (Arendt 1963, 32) aimed at "call[ing] something into being which did not exist before, which was not given" (Arendt 1954, 151). She thought it was best exemplified by Athenian democrats when they entered the public square or assembly to deliberate and take action on public matters (Villa 2008, 97, 339). Arendt was right to think that freedom as collective world-making in this sense can be a valuable experience. Participating in collective action in politics is indeed an effective way to affirm one's subjective existence concretely in the world. Whether it takes the form of protest activism, or community organizing, or volunteering on a political campaign, or simply casting a vote in a democratic election, such activity can enable us to see the world become different because of what we have done. To the extent that collective action in politics constitutes an enabling condition of agency, it can properly be counted as a form a freedom.¹⁸

¹⁶ The specification of a full theory of justice is beyond the scope of this paper, but the core commitment I have in view here is a standard liberal-democratic one: Given the equal moral status of persons, all are entitled to be treated by one another and by the state with equal respect and consideration.

¹⁷ It is perhaps worth emphasizing that the recognition involved in freedom as non-oppression is recognition of one's distinctive individuality, not recognition of the value of particular group-based identities, as in the politics of recognition literature (see Taylor 1994).

¹⁸ Freedom so conceived can be put to ill purpose, as when collective action ends in violence and injustice. Hindu mobs that carry out pogroms against Muslims, for instance, or the lynch mobs of the old American South

For all the value of freedom as collective world-making, however, it would be a mistake to think that political freedom always requires collective action in the way Arendt envisions. Freedom is not always a collective experience. The freedom to be left alone, to do one's own thing and live by one's own lights, is real freedom too, insofar as it enables individual agency. It is also a mistake to think that freedom must be limited to activity in the political domain. Collective world-making can enable agency and sustain freedom even when it does not involve overtly political activities. Likewise, while we should acknowledge that freedom is sometimes a transformative experience, involving action that breaks with the past and begins something new, there is no reason to think that it must always take this form. Sometimes freedom is just about being in the world as one is – and as the world is. It can involve doing what one has always done, or honoring an old tradition, or enacting an established norm. Freedom as collective world-making, like the others, is a part but not the whole of freedom.

None of these four ideals captures all of what political freedom means. Indeed, no one conception of freedom *can* capture the whole of it. There are different ways to be free, and the different ways in which we can be free may not always coexist easily with one another. Non-interference, non-domination, non-oppression, and collective world-making refer to experiences that are fundamentally different from one another. It is true that they are all enabling conditions of agency, which is why each one counts as a form of freedom, but the particular threats to agency that each one addresses are distinct and independent. None of these types of freedom can be subsumed under any other. Nor are they exchangeable. Just as a loss in justice cannot be compensated by a gain in beauty, so a violation of freedom as non-interference is not nullified by an especially invigorated experience of collective world-making. Likewise, when the freedom that consists in non-domination is purchased at the price of greater state interference in individual choices, the loss of freedom as non-interference is not eradicated by the gain in freedom as non-domination. There may be good reasons in particular cases to accept a loss of freedom in one form in order to gain freedom in another. But to the extent that the different forms of freedom are distinctive, it is impossible to simply exchange one type for another. In this sense at least, they are incommensurable. More of one cannot itself compensate for the loss of another.

Moreover, although all four forms of freedom serve agency, the concept of agency provides no basis for ranking them in order of priority. It would be wrong to say that non-oppression is simply more important to agency than non-domination, for instance. The prevailing relations of power that exist in a particular society at a certain moment in history may well make oppression a more pressing problem for agency in that time and place than domination. Under these circumstances, one might reasonably think that freedom as non-oppression has a special claim to priority in terms of the efforts of activists and the focus of policy initiatives in that context. Yet as a general matter, non-oppression is no more necessary to enabling human agency than the other types of freedom identified here. Nor does it offer more complete freedom than the others. Non-oppression, like non-interference, non-domination, and collective world-making, captures a part but not the whole of freedom. It covers some of the crucial conditions that support agency but by no means all of them. None of the four types is more complete or more necessary than the others; and the different types cannot be exchanged for one another or compensate the losses of others.

certainly experience their own power to make an impact on the world. But while the effects of participants affirm their identities in such cases, thereby enabling their agency, they also unfairly undermine the agency (not to mention the lives) of others. When the experience of freedom for some comes at the expense of the freedom of others it should be constrained. While freedom as world-making is a valuable form of freedom, then, its value is conditional upon the degree to which it enables agency for all rather than just a few. Freedom in this form must answer to core principles of liberal democracy, especially respect for persons. When it is agency-enabling in this broad way, freedom as world-making has an important place in liberal-democratic life. Moreover, even though freedom as collective world-making brings with it certain dangers, it is a crucial support for freedom in other forms. Freedom in all its forms regularly needs the support of political activists, individuals willing to work together to resist encroachments on their liberties and to defend freedom for all.

We can therefore talk sensibly about a “freedom pluralism” that runs parallel to Berlin’s value pluralism.¹⁹

The plurality of freedom further illuminates the complexity of women’s experience in societies that simultaneously establish equal rights and perpetuate gender-based social inequality. Women may enjoy freedom as non-interference and even non-domination, for example, while being denied freedom as non-oppression. Freedom’s plurality also helps make sense of the conflicting intuitions that many of us have when it comes to difficult debates about gender inequality and cultural difference. The case of veiling among Muslim women offers a valuable example. Some women, especially in post-colonial contexts, describe wearing the veil (including sometimes the burka) as an act of resistance to Western imperialism. They experience it as an instance of freedom as collective world-making, in which they stand up against political aggression, economic exploitation, and liberal secularism. Working together with others in their communities, they mean to inaugurate a better way of life. Wearing the veil is a mark of their participation in this collective activity of world-making; it affirms their agency and enacts freedom. Moreover, even when women choose to wear the veil for reasons that ostensibly have nothing to do with world-making – because they simply wish to live a pious life, for instance, or to honor the traditions of their native land – permitting them to do so instantiates freedom as non-interference. If we care about individual freedom, we should respect their choices. Yet from the standpoint of freedom as non-domination, wearing the veil may seem to symbolize women’s subordination to the authority of a patriarchal order in which they are subject to arbitrary power and can be instrumentalized for the purposes of others (Hirschmann 2003, ch. 6; Okin 1999). And to the extent that the veil embodies women’s secondary social status and their confinement, it will also be at odds with freedom as non-oppression.

A plural view explains the complexity of women’s experience in cases like this one. It helps us see why we have freedom-based reasons to care both about the actual choices that individual women make to wear the veil *and* about the background conditions that inform their choices and the degree to which these conditions manifest social inequality. Multiple forms of freedom are simultaneously in play. They can be mutually reinforcing but they may also conflict. Protecting freedom in some forms, such as non-interference and collective world-making, may indirectly protect patterns of social interaction that manifest inequality. This inequality may then have the effect of undercutting freedom in other forms, such as non-oppression and non-domination. From the pluralist perspective, then, the question is not *whether* women who wear the veil are free, but rather which forms of freedom are instantiated by wearing the veil and which forms of freedom are compromised. This perspective allows for a more nuanced public

¹⁹ Nevertheless, there are real differences between the two views. Above all, Berlin never suggests that the different ends pluralism accommodates are all necessary for a good life. A life lived in service to beauty at the expense of, say, political participation, need not be a morally deficient life, as he sees it. Value pluralism therefore calls for unhampered individual choice; given the variety of valuable ends that exist, people should be free to decide for themselves which ones to pursue. By contrast, human agency needs multiple forms of freedom to flourish. A society that achieved freedom as non-domination but still maintained systematic relations of oppression would be seriously deficient from the standpoint of enabling human agency. Consequently, the right response to the plurality of freedom is not to turn the individual loose to pursue whichever type of freedom she most prefers but for societies collectively to find ways to honor them all as much as possible. The need for a collective approach to managing freedom’s plural character points to another fundamental difference. Berlin conceives the choice and pursuit of particular moral values to be a properly individual enterprise. Indeed, this activity reflects the capacity for sovereign self-determination that constitutes the human essence, on his view. Once the non-sovereignty of human agency is acknowledged, however, it becomes clear that freedom is not something that one can accomplish alone. Freedom requires extensive social coordination, communicative engagement, and mutual recognition. To simply direct people to pursue their own freedom in their own ways – as Berlin directs us to choose among the various human ends that have value – would be to guarantee freedom’s failure. So rather than sanctioning an individualist, live-and-let-live mentality, the pluralism of freedom requires collective responses, although the collective responses it requires are aimed at promoting the freedom of individuals.

discussion about the relationship between freedom, inequality, and cultural difference; and it opens our eyes to the multiple ways that women can be simultaneously free and unfree.

Conclusions

Feminist perspectives on freedom would do well to start from a non-sovereign model of human agency. If we want to understand the multivalent experience of women and the paradoxes of freedom they face in ostensibly democratic societies today, we need to understand the logic of human agency better than we do. In particular, we need to grasp the non-sovereignty of human agency, the ways that it is both individuated and socially distributed. We also need to come to terms with the plural character of freedom, the fact that freedom is not one thing but has many faces, which means that serving freedom may sometimes require conflicting things of us. Freedom is rarely an all-or-nothing experience because we are almost always free and unfree along multiple dimensions. Consequently, freedom can never be perfectly complete. Still, there is reason to hope that by reorienting our theories of freedom in non-sovereign and pluralist directions we can better understand and overcome the subtle, informal obstacles to freedom that continue to constrain the life chances of women in many places around the world. And while this analysis has focused on the experiences of women in advanced democracies and the distinctive paradoxes that face them, the account of freedom developed here has implications far beyond that context. In clarifying the non-sovereignty of agency and the plurality of freedom more broadly, it offers resources for addressing the fraught relationship between freedom and social inequality in all its forms.

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