



AUTONOMY SKILLS IN LIBERAL DEPENDENCY CARE. ON ASHA BHANDARY'S *FREEDOM TO CARE*

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Introduction

Care is an important aspect of our lives because some forms of it are crucial for our survival while others promote our well-being. With the exception of the work of some liberal feminist philosophers like Susan Moller Okin's (1989) important book *Justice, Gender and the Family*, liberalism has failed to address the role of care in our daily lives, its value and its relation with justice (Bhandary, 2020, p. 2). Asha Bhandary's book *Freedom to Care: Liberalism, Dependency Care, and Culture* aims at contributing to filling this gap by developing a "form of liberal social contract theory that incorporates dependency care into a liberal egalitarian understanding of justice" (*ibidem*). "Dependency care" is defined by Bhandary as the "intensive, hands –on care provided by another person" without which, the person in need of care will not survive (*ibidem*). Bhandary argues that the receipt of dependency care should be guided by principles of justice (pp. 89–92), as the latter are identified through "a modified version of the Rawlsian original position" (pp. 11).

An important component of Bhandary's liberal dependency care theory is her account of autonomy which she terms as "autonomy skills". Autonomy skills is an account of autonomy "for real people as political beings" (p. 102). Bhandary's account of autonomy skills consists in part of the solutions that she aims at giving to the lack of

transparency which characterizes caregiving arrangements resulting in the problem of “skewed intuitions” (p. 5). The problem of skewed intuitions refers to the distorting influence of oppressive norms, tropes, and practices regarding caregiving in the shaping of the intuitions that have prevailed in liberal theory (*ibidem*).

Drawing inspiration from Rawls, Bhandary defends a new form of constructivism, the “two-level contract theory”, as one of the remedies to the problem of skewed intuitions (pp. 5, 11–12). The two-level contract theory:

...requires an evaluation of the principles of justice that people would choose when they do not know where they will be in the resultant distributive arrangement (the first level), where that thought experiment is performed by a real person in a particular historical context whose intuitions and insights will be informed by what they know and what people around them value and articulate, so that autonomy skills for real people is another necessary condition that is located at the second level of the neo-Rawlsian contract device. (p. 5).

To the extent that theorists’ intuitions and judgements are influenced by the oppressive norms, tropes, and practices of the societies where they live in, Bhandary argues in favor of teaching autonomy skills in the real world as an enduring condition of just societies that improve the context within theorists form their judgements and their intuitions (pp. 5, 97–99).

The aim of these comments is to explore liberal dependency care’s autonomy skills account and propose its enrichment with new skills so as to further promote liberal dependency care’s justice related goals. In the first part of the paper, I propose and defend the inclusion of what I shall call “social reading skills” in the autonomy skills account. In the second part, I argue in favor of the incorporation of “self-regulation skills” in autonomy skills.

1. Enriching the Autonomy Skills Account for the Oppressed

In the fifth chapter of *Freedom to Care*, the autonomy skills account that liberal dependency care endorses is developed. As already mentioned, the autonomy skills account is an account of autonomy for real people, that is, embodied human beings as political beings (p. 102). The autonomy skills account is procedural and hence, content neutral (pp. 104-105). Besides, liberal dependency care expresses a commitment to latitude in choices (*ibidem*). More specifically, procedural accounts of autonomy require that individuals follow a certain procedure in order to form autonomous choices and

allow for any content regarding autonomous choices, as long as the right procedure has been followed.¹

As Bhandary notes, procedural accounts of autonomy usually require the right relations among an individual's beliefs, desires, and volitions (p. 104). However, she diverges from this tradition of procedural accounts of autonomy and, following Meyers², she defends an account of autonomy which consists of a set of skills. To compose this set of skills, Bhandary draws inspiration from both John Stuart Mill and Diana Tietjens Meyers. Thus, the autonomy skills account encompasses two sets of skills: the Millian and the Meyersian. The Millian sub-set includes the skills of observation, perceptual parsing, discrimination, the ability to foresee, and the abilities of firmness, and self-control, in regards with a deliberate decision (pp. 98, 106–108). The Meyersian skills comprise the skills of communication, introspection, memory, analytical reasoning, imagination and self-nurturing (pp. 98, 108–109).

The aim of this part of the paper is to propose and to defend the incorporation of what I shall call “social reading skills” in the liberal dependency care's autonomy skills account. First, I will refer to the Meyersian sub-set of autonomy skills and the purpose of incorporating them in the autonomy skills account as defined by Bhandary. I will argue that, in regards to individuals who are members of oppressed social groups, autonomy skills aim at endowing them with the internal resources that will permit them to cope with the specific challenges that they face due to oppression (e.g. they can easily fall prey to instrumentalization by others), and enable them to make choices that reflect what really matters to them. Then, I will proceed to the Millian sub-set of autonomy skills. I will argue for the incorporation of social reading skills in the autonomy skills account for two reasons. First, they have an instrumental role in regards to the Millian skills of self-control and firmness. And second because they serve the aim of autonomy skills' aim.

¹ For a definition of procedural theories of personal autonomy and the different kinds of accounts that they comprise, see Mackenzie & Stoljar (2000, pp. 13–19).

² In her book *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*, Meyers defends a procedural account of personal autonomy, according to which, autonomy requires the exercise of autonomy competency. Autonomy competency consists in “the repertory of coordinated skills that makes self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction possible” (Meyers, 1989, p. 76). In her book, *Gender in the Mirror*, Meyers offers a detailed catalog of these skills (Meyers, 2002, pp. 20–21).

To begin with, as already mentioned, the Meyersian subset of skills includes the skills of communication, introspection, memory, analytical reasoning, imagination, and self-nurturing. More specifically:

Communication is necessary to avoid solipsism with an interface between a person's perceptions of the world and the external world.

Introspection is needed as a basic kind of internal thought; it enables one to direct one's thoughts toward oneself to identify how to act and what to care about.

Memory is needed to understand oneself in relation to one's earlier self, other people, and the world around one. (...)

Analytical reasoning skills are needed to be able to understand fundamental relationships among beliefs and identify obvious fallacies. (Bhandary, 2020, p. 108).

According to Bhandary, the above skills are selected by liberal dependency care in order to serve a political purpose, that is, to ensure "people's engaged participation in their own lives" and in that way to shield them against oppression (p. 108). Particularly, in liberal dependency care, memory should be also used for the project of historical records so that individuals will be able to understand previous social arrangements and gain knowledge from them (*ibidem*). In addition, communication is necessary both "for understanding oneself and others in ways that facilitate knowledge about how social arrangements affect people differently" (*ibidem*).

Furthermore, liberal dependency care adopts from Meyers's both the imagination and self-nurturing skills (p. 109). Imagination skills "can be used by disadvantaged persons to envision other possibilities" (*ibidem*), while self-nurturing skills enable *denigrated* individuals to keep their sense of self-worth and restore their physical and psychological equilibrium in harmful environments (Meyers, 2002, p. 20 as cited in Bhandary, 2020, p. 109; emphasis added).

Interestingly enough, Bhandary writes that the purpose of the Meyersian skills that liberal dependency care adopts is the following:

...to cultivate an ability to identify when social arrangements and expectations conflict with a person's right to equal standing. For instance, communication can be used for many purposes, but the idea of autonomy locates value in the individual's engaging with their world in a way that offers some protection against becoming the tool of other people and of oppressive and manipulative regimes. Thus, the skills help to realize the promise of a liberalism founded in equality. (Bhandary, 2020, p. 106).

As it becomes clear both from the more detailed reference to the skills that liberal dependency care adopts from Meyers and the passage that I have just cited, liberal dependency care selects skills that take into consideration the specific challenges that

members of oppressed social groups face e.g. they can easily become other people's tool given that oppressive social expectations and arrangements apply to them and press them for conformity with the status of subordinated. Autonomy skills aim at endowing oppressed individuals with the internal resources that will permit them to face these challenges successfully and make choices that reflect what they really value and what genuinely matters to them (see also Bhandary, 2020, p. 98). Keeping that in mind, let's proceed to the examination of the Millian sub-set of skills.

The Millian sub-set of skills includes the skills of observation, perceptual parsing, discrimination, the ability to foresee, and the abilities of firmness, and self-control with regard to deliberate decision-making. Bhandary characterizes the first three capacities as critical capacities (pp. 107-108). In more detail, regarding observation, the latter "is an important perceptual mode of openness and a mode of interfacing with the world" (p. 108). In addition, discrimination permits individuals to distinguish among different options (*ibidem*). This capacity also includes the ability to choose how one is going to cope with limited alternatives and oppressive circumstances in life (*ibidem*). Furthermore, the capacity to foresee permits individuals to reflect on the consequences of their actions (*ibidem*). Moreover, the skills of firmness and self-control are crucial for people where traditionally the role of caregiver applies e.g. mothers (p. 107). This is because these people have to cope with society's expectations which demand from them putting aside their own needs in order to care for others (*ibidem*).

At this point, I shall explore further the capacities of firmness and self-control to hold a deliberate decision. Bhandary underlines the importance of these capacities for people who, following social expectations, have learnt to prioritize the needs of others before their own. As Bhandary explains further: "People who have occupied socially designated roles as caregivers need to cultivate firmness in their understanding of their own plans, for instance, and then to be able to identify when the needs of another person legitimately trump their own" (*ibidem*). It seems that the capacities of firmness and self-control to hold a deliberate decision require some supplementary capacities if they are to effectively be exercised by individuals who belong to oppressed social groups. This is because individuals who belong to oppressed social groups face several challenges when they decide to hold on to their decisions.

For example, let's imagine a married couple—I shall name them Anne and John—where the husband is recovering from a car accident and should stay in bed for months and the wife works in a company. Anne takes care of John when at home and a nurse takes care of him when she is at work. Anne decides to attend a series of three month seminars which will permit her to get a promotion. This means that she will reduce further the time that she takes personal care of her husband. Although John accepts her decision, he says that he would prefer to have her by his side and adds that a wife who loves her husband should have as a priority taking care of him. Some friends and relatives also judge Anne for her decision and express the view that a good wife should make sacrifices and provide personal care to her husband.

Anne has been aiming for the promotion for years and missing the chance to get it will make her really miserable. Furthermore, this promotion will contribute to the finances of the family. However, she feels guilty about the prioritization of her career over providing personal care to her husband. Although she feels that a good wife should sacrifice her desires and needs, she does not want to do that, at this point. Besides, she has a great professional opportunity and a nurse that takes her place at home. The more her friends and her husband tell her that as a good wife she should take more care of her husband, the more she is ready to give up on her decision.

Anne, as a wife, occupies a social position which is traditionally related with the role of caregiver in regards to children and husband. Consequently, Anne is socially expected to prioritize the needs of others. The problem with people like Anne is not only that they are socially expected to follow oppressive norms and roles but that, in many cases, under the influence of oppressive socialization, they internalize the prescriptions of the aforementioned norms and roles. In the latter case, developing and exercising the skills of self-control and firmness might become difficult or even impossible.

For example, if Anne has consciously or unconsciously internalized the prescriptions of an oppressive gender norm according to which a good wife should provide care at the cost of sacrificing her own needs and desires—assuming though that she understands her plan—these prescriptions may surface in several forms. For example in the form of guilt about her decision to attend the seminars or in the form of doubts on whether she is a good wife given that she has chosen to provide less personal care to her

husband.³ If Anne is to exhibit firmness and self-control she must develop some capacities that will help her to cope with the feelings of guilt and doubt. For example, she must be able to reflect upon her feelings of guilt and doubt and check whether it is justified to have these feelings or if the latter are manifestations of internalized oppressive gender norms which incorporate an unfair division of care labor. Hence, Anne should exercise her introspection skills according to the autonomy skills account.

In addition, the fact that the social norms which apply to individuals who belong to oppressed social groups are widespread make oppressed individuals more vulnerable to social pressure, manipulation, and gaslighting. For example, Anne's husband could attempt to manipulate her, taking advantage of her feelings of guilt and the wide social acceptance of gender norms which determine what a good wife should do. He might tell her that her feelings of guilt indicate that she has chosen something that is morally wrong. Besides, all their relatives and friends agree to that. Under circumstances of social pressure, manipulation, or gaslighting which have a long duration, the skills of self-control and firmness—even when highly developed—may weaken. In the latter case, individuals should have developed some other skills that will permit them to protect their self-control and firmness skills.

Such skills would be the skills of being able to spot and identify the conditions of social pressure, manipulation, or gaslighting that aim at destabilizing their internal balance to the point of rendering them incapable of keeping their firmness or self-control regarding one's decision. These skills which I call “social reading skills” refer to an individual's ability to read the situations and the behavior of other people in their social environment and spot when other people try to pressure, manipulate, or gaslight them through the use of widespread oppressive social norms. Individuals with developed social reading skills will be able to easily spot social pressure, manipulation, or gaslighting and decide what they will do so as to protect their autonomy.

Apart from the instrumental value of social reading skills regarding the skills of self-control and firmness, the possession of social reading skills is necessary for autonomy because individuals who are capable of spotting social pressure, manipulation, and gaslighting early are better equipped to prevent the diminishment of

³For a detailed discussion of the effects of gender internalized oppression on women's emotions and personal autonomy, see (Γλαντζή, 2020, pp. 318–321). I also develop a theory of personal autonomy which is partly based on Meyers's (ibidem, pp. 304–321).

their autonomy that follows when someone is a victim of the aforementioned behaviors. Namely, they can effectively prevent their instrumentalization and their exploitation.

If, as Bhandary writes and I have already mentioned, “the idea of autonomy locates value in the individual’s engaging with their world in a way that offers some protection against becoming the tool of other people and of oppressive and manipulative regimes” and hence “the skills [that are included in autonomy skills account] help to realize the promise of a liberalism founded in equality” (p. 106), then social reading skills must be included into the arsenal of autonomy skills account because when oppressed individuals use social reading skills effectively, they forestall their instrumentalization.

Besides, as I argued earlier, autonomy skills aim at endowing oppressed individuals with the internal resources that will permit them to cope with the specific challenges that they face as members of oppressed social groups and thus, enable them to choose what they really value. Social reading skills must be incorporated into autonomy skills because, social pressure, manipulation, or gaslighting when based upon what oppressive social roles, norms, and arrangements prescribe for oppressed individuals become some of the special challenges that oppressed individuals face and endanger their autonomy. Hence, they should be well equipped so as to face these challenges.

In this part of the paper, I proposed and defended the incorporation of social reading skills in autonomy skills. In the next part of the paper, I will propose and defend the inclusion of what I shall call “self-regulation skills” in autonomy skills. Self-reading skills are especially important for the autonomy of oppressed people while, as I will show, self-regulation skills promote the autonomy of privileged people.

2. Autonomy Skills for the Members of Privileged Groups

In the seventh chapter of *Freedom to Care* which is entitled “Teaching Boys How to Care”, Bhandary defends an “action-guiding policy proposal for societies like the United States” which she calls “the strong procedural principle for care provision” (p. 138). According to this principle, caregiving should be open to choice on condition that

the four principles that Bhandary defended in the fourth chapter of her book are satisfied (pp. 138–139). I shall briefly cite the four principles:

- 1) The Survival Baseline Principle: First, parties in the original position will share a desire to receive enough care to survive. (p. 89)
- 2) The Anti-Disadvantage Principle: The person who is the caregiver should not be disadvantaged by virtue of their role as a caregiver. (p. 90)
- 3) The No-Correlation-To-Disadvantaged-Social-Groups Principle: Caregiving must not be the responsibility of a social group that is already disadvantaged. Liberal dependency care rejects caregiving arrangements that have strong correlations between caregiving and race, ethnicity, gender, or membership in any other meaningful social group that is currently disadvantaged. (p. 90)
- 4) The Limited-Concentration Principle: Caregiving must not be concentrated in a small group of individuals, even if those individuals have nothing else in common besides being caregivers. What counts as a distribution that is concentrated in a small group of people will require further data points and deliberation by people in the real world. (p. 91)

More precisely, according to the principle of “strong proceduralism”, the aforementioned four principles should be satisfied “in ways that respond to existing inequalities while maintaining respect for individuality and personal choice” (pp. 138–139). Bhandary explains that this principle is called “strong proceduralism” because although it leaves caregiving open to choice, it supports teaching caregiving skills to people “who have not previously possessed them” (p. 139). That is, members of privileged groups who tend to receive more care and contribute less (*ibidem*).

Bhandary contends that “[t]he idea that caregiving should be open to choice must be specified to remove the obstacles that make existing actions of caregivers less than autonomous” and also render caregiving a viable option for those who have not been caregivers, e.g. men (*ibidem*). Regarding the obstacles that make caregiving less than autonomous, according to Bhandary, autonomy in caregiving actions requires, at least, “a threshold level of competency in the autonomy skills” (*ibidem*).

In addition, Bhandary considers that the skills that people have, affect how appealing several options are to them (p. 141). Masculine socialization does not train men in caregiving skills and this affects their evaluation of the option to provide care. As Bhandary puts it:

...society should set a goal of having autonomy skills that are widespread among its members, so a society in which women often have inadequate autonomy skills must take measures to remedy that state of affairs by, for instance, reinforcing the skills of introspection, memory, and volitional capacities among young girls. In addition, the skills needed to achieve free choice in the domain of care go beyond autonomy skills (...) because the skills a person possesses affect the viability of a given option: participating in an activity is more rewarding once a person can do so with at least a

minimum level of competence. Consequently, men need to have a basic level of competency in caregiving skills in order to have a genuine opportunity to provide care, but traditional forms of masculine socialization do not teach the basic caregiving skills. (pp. 141–142).

In the above passage, Bhandary argues that society should promote autonomy skills to women. Bhandary takes into consideration that members of oppressed social groups may develop adaptive preference or deformed desires or internalize their oppression (pp. 12, 75–76). Hence, it is not surprising that in the fifth chapter of her book where Bhandary develops her account of autonomy, in several passages-many of them have been cited in the previous part of this paper-explains or argues for the significance of the skills included in her account of autonomy skills in regards with the autonomy of members of oppressed social groups.

Bhandary also acknowledges that members of privileged social groups may internalize their privilege. According to a relevant passage:

Disadvantage and privilege are constituted by more than differences in income and wealth, for they can pervade individuals' self-conceptions. Even when individuals obtain critical distance from perspective socialization, socio-relational entitlements and expectations will continue to be directed at them. (p. 75).

Furthermore, when she develops and defends her account of autonomy skills, she gives an example on how autonomy skills help a privileged person to understand her internalized privilege. More precisely, as already mentioned, Bhandary includes communication skills in her theory. I wish to mention again that according to the autonomy skills account, communication is necessary so that people avoid solipsism and understand both themselves and each other in ways that promote the knowledge of the different impact that social arrangements have on people who belong to different social groups (p. 108). Regarding communication skills, Bhandary offers the example of communication between two women, a white woman and a minority woman, and argues that: "...for the white woman to come to a meaningful understanding of herself, she may need to see how her claims to victimhood and fragility can be directly damaging to her non-white female friend" (*ibidem*).

The above example shows that not only internalized oppression but also internalized privilege may be an obstacle for autonomy. Especially when privileged people behave in ways that are offensive to people who belong to oppressed social groups and in that way the former violate their values without even realizing it. I shall return to this point immediately after a short comment on caregiving skills.

I agree with Bhandary that if caregiving is to be a choice open to all, it is necessary that caregiving skills will be taught to those who do not possess them. Bhandary, proposes teaching boys the skills of attentiveness, responsiveness, and equipping them both with knowledge and practice-specific skills and the epistemic tool of the “transparent self” (pp. 143–145, 197). Specifically, attentiveness refers to the attention that the caregiver should pay to the needs of the care recipient (pp. 142–143). Responsiveness is a skill of acting responsively to the needs of the care recipient (pp. 143–144). These skills must be supplemented by “practice specific” skills and knowledge (p. 144). Moreover, the epistemic tool of transparent self refers to the capacity of the caregiver to understand the needs of the care recipient without modifying them according to her own needs (pp. 144-145).

All of the above skills will endow men with the capacities that are required so that they will be able to provide care. Furthermore, through their familiarization in caregiving skills those who have a tendency and a talent for caregiving will discover it and consider it as an option (pp. 141-142). My only concern is that even then, internalized privilege may be a strong obstacle for some people so as to consider caregiving seriously as an option. Of course, we cannot foresee to what extent teaching autonomy and caregiving skills will contribute to a change in societies. But it is better to take every possible measure that we can so as to ensure that we will limit the distortions in people’s choices due to internalized privilege. Hence, I would suggest enriching the autonomy skills account with what I shall call “self-regulation skills” which are especially important for the autonomy and the agency of privileged people.⁴

I shall begin with an example. In the last chapter of the book, Bhandary offers a typology of men in patriarchy (pp. 181–185). One of them is Robert – “a ‘fair’ man in a patriarchal society” (pp. 181–182). Robert, as he says, “is committed to equality, autonomy, and fairness” and “[w]hen presented with an argument that justice requires a de-gendering of care labor, Robert grants the reasonableness of the proposal” (p. 181). However, along with others, he assumed that his wife due to her gender should undertake all dependency caregiving at home (*ibidem*). As Bhandary writes: “...he fails to act fairly, because, as a man in a patriarchal society who has not undertaken the study

⁴ The term “self-regulation” is also used in psychology. Here, the term “self-regulation skills” is confined to philosophy of action and denotes the agential skills that I refer to.

required to understand its effects on his life, he does not realize the flawed content of his expectations” (pp. 181–182).

Maybe Robert has never thought of the contradiction between the values he endorses and his behavior. How can he endorse de-gendering of care labor and yet assume that Mary as a woman should undertake all the caregiving at home? For sure, a study of the effects of patriarchy in his life will help him understand why his behavior toward Mary is contrary to the value of equality that he endorses and how internalized privilege leads him to act like that. But even in the latter case, he should possess what I call “self-regulation skills” that will render him capable of staying committed to the values of equality, autonomy, and fairness that he denotes.

Specifically, I would define self-regulation skills, in the context of the autonomy skills account, as a cluster of skills that enable individuals to check themselves to see how their daily actions might compromise their commitment to their values and then, take measures to change their behavior. For example, it is not enough for Robert to study about how patriarchy influences his behavior and prevents him from acting according to the value of equality. He must also be able to apply this knowledge to his daily behavior, to be vigilant when he suspects that internalized privilege interferes with his commitment to equality, and to be able to find ways to correct his behavior.

Concluding, if the inclusion of self-regulation skills in autonomy skills contributes to individuals gaining a higher degree of autonomy, then it will further promote liberal dependency care’s strong proceduralism.

3. Conclusion

Rich in ideas and refined arguments, *Freedom to Care* highlights the importance of justice in care arrangements and uses liberalism’s conceptual and normative resources to defend principles of justice that will guide caregiving. In these comments, I focused on the account of autonomy that liberal dependency care endorses. In her coda, Bhandary writes that “[a]utonomy skills are needed as an ongoing condition to secure, maintain, correct, and strive for a just world and, in this way, my main argument for them is internal to the theory as a component of the two-level contract device” (p.

198). With my comments, I have proposed how this component of the two-level contract device can be enriched.

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