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Bodily Relational Autonomy

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Abstract

Conceptions of autonomy in Western philosophy and ethics have often centered on self-governance and self-determination. However, a growing bulk of literature also questions such conceptions including the understanding of the autonomous self as a self-governing independent individual that chooses, acts and lives in accordance with her or his own values, norms or sense of self. This article contributes to the critical interrogation of selfhood, autonomy and autonomous decision-making by combining a feminist focus on relational dimensions of selfhood and autonomy with phenomenological philosophy of the embodied self as being-in-the-world. It offers a philosophical investigation of different dimensions of bodily relational autonomy by turning to phenomenological accounts of the lived body as self-reflexive. When so doing, we hope to contribute to bridging the gap that sometimes exists between discussions of autonomy in analytic moral philosophy and of freedom and facticity in phenomenological philosophy. We see this gap as unfortunate, and hold that a nuanced understanding of autonomy and autonomous decision-making can be reached if these strands of philosophy are brought into dialogue.

Keywords: autonomy, autonomous decision-making, embodiment, feminist theory, selfhood, relationality, phenomenology of the body.

Introduction

Conceptions of autonomy in Western philosophy and ethics have often centered on self-governance and self-determination. A growing bulk of literature also questions such conceptions including the understanding of the autonomous self as a self-governing independent individual that chooses, acts and lives in accordance with her or his own values, norms or sense of self. What is needed, critics hold, is both an acknowledgment of the social dimension of selfhood and a detailed analysis of the implications of a relational conception of the self for autonomy and autonomous decision-making.ⁱ

This article contributes to the critical interrogation of selfhood, autonomy and autonomous decision-making by combining a feminist focus on relational dimensions of selfhood and autonomy with phenomenological philosophy of the embodied self as being-in-the-world. Our starting point is an understanding of the self or subjectivity as embodied and situated in a world and in relation to others. This means that any independent agency is inherently dependent on the situation in which it is articulated. Relational autonomy conceptions examine how the self is formed in relations and how these relations can constitute selfhood, but they often leave out the role of embodiment.ⁱⁱ In contrast, we ask what it might mean to consider the notion of autonomy in terms of the body and thus extend and somewhat refocus the discussion of relational autonomy.

The article offers a philosophical investigation of different dimensions of bodily relational autonomy by turning to phenomenological accounts of the lived body as self-reflexive. It is our hope that such a move will contribute to bridging a gap between discussions of autonomy in analytic moral philosophy and of freedom and facticity in phenomenological philosophy, thereby enabling a different understanding of autonomy and autonomous decision-making than those dominating analytic moral philosophy, and also enrich phenomenological discussions with the language of autonomy. First we situate our claims in recent discussions, mainly in analytic moral philosophy, on relational dimensions of autonomous decision-making. Second, we turn to phenomenological philosophy, focusing on the way in which individual subjects are formed in expressive and meaningful interrelation with one another, bracketing given conceptions of the autonomous subject as self-sufficient and with fixed boundaries, and examining bodily dimensions of autonomy. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of the lived body as a self-reflective structure possessing its own operative intentionality,ⁱⁱⁱ we discuss a basic bodily autonomy inherent in the lived body, thereby allowing for a rethinking of the meaning of autonomy beyond a focus on cognitive

rationality and independence. Third, we examine the autonomy of habituated decisions, actions and ways of being in the world, and how particular modes of acting and interacting with others and the world are sedimented in the subject's lived body. Finally, we examine how autonomous choice may be hampered, how sedimented social injustices may feed into choice and decision-making, and how someone's bodily style of being can form what she or he sees as choices in the first place.

II. Towards a more comprehensive and tenable conception of autonomy

A first basic distinction in analytic moral philosophy is the one between autonomous subjects and autonomous choices, decisions or actions; an individual may be autonomous and yet not be able or have the opportunity to make autonomous decisions in all situations.^{iv} In line with this distinction some scholars combine analyses of what it means to be an autonomous self with those of conditions for autonomous decision-making while others choose either to examine the meaning of autonomous selfhood or conditions for the autonomous decision-making or action.

In contrast to the latter approach, we see an examination of selfhood, as embodied, situated and intersubjective as an important first step in investigating conditions for autonomous decision-making. This approach allows a discussion of how habituated modes of acting can come to function as taken-for-granted parts of someone's existence and whether such habituated modes of action can qualify as autonomous. It furthermore draws attention to the structures of subjectivity, inquiring into the constitutive role of its situatedness.

A second distinction can be made between formal, procedural and substantial accounts of what is required for someone to be able and have the opportunity to make autonomous decisions. Formal accounts of autonomous decision-making only require that we have the capacity and opportunity to decide to perform a particular act and to execute that decision.^v No specific reflection is deemed necessary prior to the act, whereas this is the case in procedural accounts where a certain kind of reflection or the capacity for a certain kind of reflection is a condition for a decision to qualify as autonomous.^{vi} Substantial accounts, finally, require that the result of the autonomous decision is of a particular kind, has a particular substance or that the individuals who perform the autonomous decision have a certain normative competence enabling them to embrace certain values. Irrespective of whether the account of autonomous decision-making is formal, procedural or substantive, a growing number of critics argue that

many of these accounts are underpinned by a problematic individualistic understanding of selfhood, that they fail to acknowledge intersubjective aspects of selfhood, and that they fail to examine implications of social dimensions for conceptions of autonomy.^{vii}

Some relational approaches to autonomy focus on the way in which social relations and particularly asymmetrical power relations may enhance or hamper autonomy, whereas others examine how the self, who is involved in autonomous decision-making, is constituted through, in and by interactions with others.^{viii} However, and despite the heterogeneity within this field, relational approaches to autonomy typically share a conviction that individuals and individual agency are formed within social relationships and by intersecting aspects of identity, such as race, class, gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity and ability; demonstrate the need to acknowledge and take into consideration how social, cultural and historical conditions impact individuals' sense of themselves (such as sense of self-esteem, self-value, self-trust); and emphasize that personal autonomy is inconceivable in isolation from the social context of the autonomous agent. Along such lines, autonomy has been conceptualized as something that is achieved as a person comes into being in relation to others, rather than as an inborn quality or entitlement.^{ix}

In accordance with our phenomenological starting-points, the self engaged in decision-making is not only formed in relations with others. Rather, intersubjectivity is understood as a constitutive dimension of selfhood, and not an optional extra that we may or may not develop over time. In short, selfhood is intrinsically intersubjective and any understanding of selfhood in isolation from its intersubjective properties is always an abstraction.

Three more features of contemporary autonomy discussions are useful by way of introduction for our account of bodily relational autonomy. First, relational accounts of autonomy have brought out the social and intersubjective aspects of subjectivity, and dismissed any ideas of autonomy in terms of autarchic independence (in the sense of self-sufficiency) in favor of understanding autonomous agents as living and making reflective decisions situated within and dependent on a social context. While recognizing the importance of carefully considering the relational dimensions of selfhood, many contemporary accounts of autonomy also stress the capacity to reflect on one's own motivational structures and to change these in response to reflection.^x Most often, reflection is understood (or assumed) in terms of a cognitive operation of the mind, following a traditional understanding of autonomy in terms of freedom of

reason. Even though relational accounts of autonomy commonly reject any idea of reason as disembodied in so far as they stress the situatedness of subjectivity, there is nevertheless insufficient analysis of one of the key components of this situatedness, namely that of the body.

Second, much of the critical discussion of relational autonomy accounts is targeted against two connected conceptions of the autonomous agent, namely, on the one hand, the idea(l) of an independent atomistic individual and, on the other hand, the idea(l) of a (moral) self-legislator guided by impartial and abstract principles of reason. We not only reject both of these ideals by stressing the intersubjectivity and situatedness of the autonomous agent and her decision making, but also contest the idea that the autonomous agent is necessarily a morally autonomous agent and that personal autonomy implies moral autonomy. Even though personal and moral autonomy are interconnected, we contend that they must be understood separately albeit not completely isolated from one another. The account of bodily relational autonomy we develop in this article does not necessarily entail moral autonomy. Our account would grant personal autonomy on a basic bodily level to for instance infants, persons experiencing dissociation, psychosis or suffering severe cognitive and communicative impairments, while not necessarily conceiving of these individuals in terms of moral autonomy and agency. This implies an enlarged and multifaceted conception of autonomy.

Third, phenomenologists typically do not talk about autonomy, but about situated freedom and the interplay between freedom and facticity. Such terms draw attention to the situated character of the autonomous agent, disrupting any clear distinction between autonomy and heteronomy. In much the same way as proponents of relational approaches to autonomy, phenomenologists are critical of the conception of the self as an independent atomistic individual. In contrast to at least some relational approaches to autonomy, phenomenologists have furthermore sought to re-formulate the very understanding of subjectivity in ways that acknowledge embodiment, intersubjectivity and embeddedness in the world. They provide thorough accounts of how we are born into a world already inhabited, shaped and made meaningful by others, and how human existence is characterized by a basic openness to others and the world.

III. Bodily autonomy

The lack of consideration of bodily autonomy is in Catriona Mackenzie's view due to a general neglect of the notion of embodiment. In so far as bodily autonomy has been discussed it has to a great extent been in a Lockean tradition of considering one's own body in terms of ownership and often in a way that equates bodily autonomy with control over the body and bodily processes.^{xi} In contrast to this view, Mackenzie argues, drawing on Paul Ricoeur, that a person's body belongs to her in the sense of being constitutive of her selfhood and that bodily integration, rather than the separation involved in ownership and control, is constitutive of bodily autonomy. She develops the idea of what she calls an integrated bodily perspective, which "marks the point of intersection of biological capacities, attributes and processes, social and cultural representations of these, and, an individual's particular history, projects, desires, and relations with others" and which "is enmeshed with our self-conception and structures our bodily experience, our relations with others and our interactions with the world".^{xii} One's bodily perspective is not in any way static but is rather continuously and actively constituted as the expression of one's embodied agency.

Mackenzie strongly stresses that an integrated bodily perspective is not enough for the achievement of bodily autonomy, which must also involve normative critical reflection. Bodily autonomy, she writes, "involves not merely identifying with one's bodily perspective [...] but doing so on the basis of a normative assessment of one's perspective".^{xiii} The reflection that Mackenzie has in mind would thus seem to be on a rather high level of cognitive capacity and this goes along with her claim that autonomy is an achievement. This form of critical reflection would also seem to require a certain degree of distancing and whether, and if so, how, such distancing is or can be present in one's integrated bodily perspective unfortunately remains rather unclear in Mackenzie's account. Since one's integrated bodily perspective is something that develops throughout a lifetime, it would seem plausible that critical reflection could become habituated as part of this perspective even though it may not at a later stage be expressed in terms of critical distancing.

This relation between a critical perspective and an integrated bodily perspective as the expression of one's embodied agency deserves further explication. We will approach this relation with reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings on the lived body as self-reflective and the sedimentation of higher forms of reflection in habituated and immediate ways of being in the world. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological

descriptions of the lived body and its comportment in the world and relation to others offer a rich account of bodily integration. His account also opens for a possibility of approaching the relation between embodiment and reflection in new ways. By disrupting any easy dualistic distinction between mind and body, the phenomenological notion of the lived body provides a way of challenging both the idea that bodily comportment is guided and controlled by reason or consciousness and the idea that spontaneous bodily comportment is simply a matter of mechanistic or automatic movement or behavioral dispositions. The lived body, its comportment, habits and routines, is instead characterized by intentionality and is projectively directed and open to the world in which it finds itself and of which it forms part. The intentionality of the lived body constitutes it as fundamentally open to new possibilities and to forming its own style of being in interconnection with its conditions.

In the language of bodily autonomy, it is the intentionality of the lived body that constitutes it as autonomous. The lived body is a self-governing system in so far as it possesses intentionality not on the level of cognitive reflection, but, rather, a so-called corporeal or operative intentionality.^{xiv} The operative intentionality of the embodied subject reflects its kinaesthetic freedom, i.e. its freedom to move in the sensible world in which it is situated and is both a matter of reaching out into the world through this kinaesthetic freedom and of being open to the world and incorporating elements of the world, such as tools, values and relations. This kinaesthetic freedom is thus thoroughly situated and expressed in relation to the facticity of a specific situation. It is in this situated freedom that we locate a basic bodily autonomy, in terms of free movement in the world and in relation to others.

Keeping in mind how some autonomy accounts require a certain form of reflection, it is noteworthy that a basic reflection, although not in traditional terms of rational cognition, also operates in the lived body: within this philosophical perspective, the lived body is a self-reflexive structure in so far as it holds the capacity for so-called double sensation. This capacity allows us to approach the requirement of self-reflection on a bodily level rather than on a level of cognitive reflection. With reference to Edmund Husserl, Merleau-Ponty invokes the figure of two hands touching to illustrate the phenomenon of double sensation, as a distinguishing characteristic of the lived body in relation to things. He writes,

[I]n this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instance the integument or incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. The body catches itself from the outside engaged in a cognitive process; it tries to touch itself while being touched, and initiates ‘a kind of reflection’ which is sufficient to distinguish it from objects.^{xv}

What Merleau-Ponty terms a “kind of reflection” here is not one in which the body is taken as an external object for consciousness; the intentional constitution of the body as an integrated unity cannot be located in any separate operation of an autonomous mind and the experience of double sensation is not to be understood in terms of a subject-object relation where the body appears to the self in any relation of ownership. Albeit not in terms of subject and object, the bodily reflection nevertheless involves an element of distance. As Renaud Barbaras argues, an actual coincidence between touching and touched in terms of a pure subjectivity would in fact result in the complete splitting of one’s body in so far as “this subject would not *have* a body” and “would not be *its own* body”. The body would instead, he continues, “emigrate to the side of the objective world” and we would find ourselves in a strictly dualistic framework in which the body could potentially be conceptualized as an object of ownership and control.^{xvi} Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty characterizes the self-reflective structure of double sensation as a “cognitive process” stressing that the lived body cannot be reduced to materiality and that cognition cannot be reduced to processes of a disembodied mind. What is at stake is thus a rethinking of both materiality and cognition, which has implications for how we conceive of subjectivity in relation to its own embodiment. Such rethinking forms the starting point for our account of bodily relational autonomy. The cognitive capacity of the lived body should be understood in terms of a bodily know-how that allows us to perform everyday activities and engage with others in meaningful ways. Through its intentionality, the lived body grasps, creates and relates to the world as a world of meaning.

What is brought out here is the insufficiency of reinstating the body in the order of the subject while not at the same time also reconceptualizing subjectivity in terms other than those of atomistic self-coincidence. Indeed, we are not suggesting an understanding of the body as a pure subject but, rather, in terms of an incarnate sensibility uniting

interiority and exteriority.^{xvii} The self-sensing of the lived body is an experience in which the self encounters her body as exteriority and in which it becomes clear that in order for her to be an experiencing subject, she must also be experiencable to herself as well as to others. Merleau-Ponty puts this point nicely when saying that “to feel one’s body is also to feel its aspect for the other” namely that it is perceivable as an object in the world.^{xviii} The self experiences herself in a way that anticipates both the way she can experience another and the way another can experience her.

This way of conceptualizing the lived body establishes an understanding of subjectivity as inherently relational and intersubjective, which has implications for how to conceptualize the autonomous agent and opens up for a rethinking of what qualifies as reflection. However, we cannot be content with accounting only for reflection on a bodily level but must also ask how rational reflection is related to the self-reflective structure of the lived body. Here, we will turn to the phenomenological notion of sedimentation and inquire into the structure of the habitual body. This will also provide a way of addressing autonomy as it is expressed and made manifest on an everyday level of habitual comportment and action in the world.

IV. Sedimentation and the autonomous habitual body

Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of sedimentation in order to describe how past experience can feed into, form and restrict, our bodily becoming. Sedimentation is the result of the fact that an “attitude towards the world, when it has received frequent confirmation, acquires a favoured status for us”.^{xix} As expressed and enacted beliefs, norms, values and behaviour through repeated practice become incorporated and sedimented into our lived body and acquire such “favoured status” that is not easy to change, they thereby also become part of our habitual mode of existence and co-existence.

The phenomenon of habit, however, is not simply a recurring way of acting, thinking or feeling, but a bodily know-how. Habit, writes Merleau-Ponty, “prompts us to revise our notion of ‘understand’ and our notion of the body”^{xx} as it resides neither in the mind nor in the objective body, but, rather, in the body as lived operative intentionality. The bodily intentionality is a bond by which the embodied subject is “tied to a certain world”^{xxi} and this involves the capacity to incorporate elements of the world so fully that they become part of one’s lived body and as such do not need cognitive reflection in order to be actualized. In fact, while embodiment is a necessary

condition for interaction with the world, one's own lived body and all that has been incorporated within it would hinder interaction if it were to become an object for reflection. Directly focusing on and objectifying each move one makes when for instance running down a flight of stairs would most likely hinder one's movements to such an extent that one might risk falling.

Incorporation and cultivation of habit also involve the acquisition of character and a specific style of being, through sedimentation of beliefs, norms, values and behaviour in which a person recognizes herself and which eventually come to be those traits by which a person is recognized by others.^{xxii} Here it is important to distinguish between acquisition of habit that is the result of deliberate choice and reflective self-cultivation on the one hand and acquisition of habit that simply happens through repeated action without conscious reflection on the other hand, such as for instance the habitual way of putting one foot in front of the other when walking or of focusing the eyes when reading. If such unreflective bodily habits are disrupted in one way or another they can become objects for reflection and lead to reflective rehabituation. These different forms of habituation raise the question of whether habitual modes of being can qualify as autonomous. When making an autonomous decision, there is, as Mackenzie and Stoljar point out, a difference between aspects of our motivational structures that we simply find ourselves with and aspects that we regard as our own after having reflected on them.^{xxiii}

With regard to habituation of character traits as a result of deliberate decision making, Wim Dekkers argues for an understanding of bodily autonomy that takes into consideration and grants authority to remnants of previously made decisions that once were subjected to critical reflection and have been sedimented in the body as individual preferences. Discussing the case of severe dementia, Dekkers suggests that behavioral patterns of persons suffering from dementia “may be interpreted as a remainder of what once has been ‘real’, that is, rational autonomy.”^{xxiv} Dekkers does not provide any straightforward definition of rational autonomy but his discussion strongly suggests that what he has in mind is rationality in terms of a cognitive process of deliberation and reflection. He puts forth an account of bodily autonomy which combines a phenomenological approach and understanding of the lived body with a biomedical notion of automatism and which is able to account for sedimented behavioral patterns as autonomous. He suggest a use of the term bodily autonomy “analogously to the meaning of the term ‘autonomic nervous system’” on the basis of the autonomic

nervous system not being directly accessible to voluntary control even though higher brain centers can control autonomic functions. From this follows that, “some body parts possess an autonomy that can only indirectly be controlled by higher brain centres.”^{xxv} Such body parts would include for instance vital organs that possess a different form of autonomy than the one we have been discussing in relation to operative intentionality. Furthermore, while recognizing an autonomy of the lived body, independent of conscious deliberations, he nevertheless seems to base his argument on an idea of “real” autonomy as a cognitive achievement that through habituation can be incorporated into one’s own lived body as a certain character or style of being. “Tacit bodily knowledge,” he writes, “is based on the sedimentation of life narratives.”^{xxvi}

In cases of severe dementia, that Dekkers discusses, it seems fairly unproblematic to speak of a bodily habituation of one’s own past reflections, preferences and deliberate decisions in so far as symptoms of dementia develop in ages where they disrupt and alter an already formed identity and relatively long life history. However, while it may make perfect sense to speak of the tacit bodily knowledge of a person suffering from dementia as based on sedimentation of his or her life narratives, it does not immediately follow that these life narratives reflect rational autonomy in the sense of a cognitive achievement or deliberately and reflectively made decisions. We can well imagine cases, such as ones of extreme oppression, severe psychosis or grave illness, in which the sedimentation of habits may have followed lines deprived of “real” or “rational” autonomy. In fact, the habitual body does not only refer to sedimentation of conscious acts of deliberation but also to sedimentation of undeliberated responses to situations, objects and others in the world. Such sedimentation may be articulated as a specific style of being, which we will discuss in the next section. Further and as discussed above, residing in the body as lived operative intentionality, habitual actions have what Merleau-Ponty refers to as “motor significance;” the acquisition of habit, he writes, “is indeed the grasping of a significance, but it is the motor grasping of a motor significance.”^{xxvii} We can also imagine cases, such as the case of infancy, in which no rational autonomous decisions have been made and were such decisions have therefore left no remnants to be habituated.

Thus, with reference to Merleau-Ponty’s account of operative intentionality and the self-reflexive structure of the lived body described earlier, we suggest that a notion of bodily autonomy does not require “a remainder of what once has been ‘real’, that is, rational autonomy”, to speak with Dekkers, but can in fact be developed further beyond

the habituation and sedimentation of rational autonomy and deliberate decision making. As we have seen, the lived body possesses its own operative intentionality, reflecting its kinaesthetic freedom that cannot be reduced to a bodily automatism, in terms of mere biomedical functioning or mechanical behaviourism. In fact, the phenomenological notion of the lived body resists a conventional opposition between automatism and autonomy. Merleau-Ponty does discuss cases, predominantly the case of the WWI veteran Johann Schneider, in which motor intentionality and bodily habits take on a mechanical character but these are, according to Merleau-Ponty, pathological ways of being in the world where a basic bodily autonomy in different ways is arrested, inhibited and rehabilitated.

V. Bodily relational autonomy

Thus far we have established that the lived body is inherently relational and intersubjective; its operative intentionality and reflective structure are directed towards and open to the physical, social, cultural and historical world in which it is situated and of which it forms part. We have further discussed two forms of bodily autonomy, namely, on the one hand, the autonomy inherent in the lived body itself through its operative intentionality and self-reflective structure of double sensation and, on the other hand, the autonomy of habituated actions, decisions and ways of being in the world, both previously reflected upon as well as unreflected. Here we will discuss the latter and in addition to focusing on the role of the body, we also highlight how interactions between self and others can become sedimented and integrated parts of an individual person's style of being.

A bodily style of being refers to a certain manner of engaging with others and the world, which emerges from the body's capacities, from habituated expressive postures, and ways of feeling, thinking, acting and responding to others. It is the result of habitual modes of being which, as discussed above, acquire "a favoured status for us" through gradually feeding into our bodily existence. Merleau-Ponty exemplifies with the case of a man who has built his life upon an inferiority complex for many years; he has made "an adobe" in certain attitudes and patterns of action and being that can form perception, emotion and action. The man may come to see certain social situations as intimidating and feel intimidated by and shy away from them.^{xxviii} In this sense, having a style is a matter of "being a body and having a history," as put by Linda Singer.^{xxix}

The notion of style and Merleau-Ponty's example of the man embodying an inferiority complex allow us to better understand how the self's sedimented bodily way of being-in-the-world can express remnants of experiences and decisions made in the past. Past experiences of intimidating social gatherings – where others respond to him in a way that he experienced as threatening – may make the man in question avoid similar situations again. In many cases this may not be the result of an explicit choice and even in cases where a choice is made, it is not enough to note that it has been made; past experiences of interaction with others including experiences of others' past responses need also be brought to light. This is not to psychologize behaviour; the point is rather that if social gatherings are repeatedly avoided, then this mode of non-interaction can become an integrated part of habitual ways of acting and interacting – i.e. a style of being – in which social encounters are perceived as frightening or intimidating. In this way, a style of being can put restrictions on the subject in terms of what actions, gestures etc. that will be or come easily; future possibilities are transformed into more or less likely probabilities.

This case highlights that a bodily style of being is intersubjectively formed and indeed constituted in relation between the self, others and the world. The man who has built his life on an inferiority complex has not done so in a social vacuum: his action and others' responses to him are intertwined in a way that makes it pointless to seek to define what is "his" and what comes from "others" in his style of being. In other words, his mode of being-with others is forming and constituting his bodily style of being.

The notion of a bodily style of being that we have just discussed is often brought in to keep the notions of freedom and facticity together. While there is no determinism in a style of being, according to Merleau-Ponty, and we may act unexpectedly and contrary to that style, such contrary action is nonetheless less probable. Freedom needs to be understood against the backdrop of the idea that we are born into a world already constituted with meaning. The subject's freedom is furthermore bound up with her or his bodily existence and co-existence. Insisting that to be "born is both to be born of the world and to be born into the world,"^{xxx} Merleau-Ponty captures how human beings exist in the double way of being both already constituted with a certain meaning and at the same time themselves constituting meaning. He thereby offers an account of the situatedness of the subject that recognizes how specific situations form the conditions for free choices, without completely determining these choice and eliminating freedom altogether. In the "exchange between the situation and the person who takes it up,"

Merleau-Ponty argues, “it is impossible to determine precisely the ‘share contributed by the situation’ and ‘the share contributed by freedom.’”^{xxxix} Freedom is thus situated in such a way that “there is no freedom without a field” and since the embodied subject is of the world with which it is in constitutive relation, it is not outside herself that she is able to find a limit to her freedom.^{xxxii}

Merleau-Ponty’s account of the situatedness of freedom serves as key for our conception of choice and decision-making as well: there is no dichotomous and sharp division between influences and limits on decision-making from the “inside” and “outside” in this perspective. The possible limits to our choices need to be understood differently: there are choices to make, but that which stands forth as a choice is thoroughly formed by our bodily modes of acting and interacting with others and the world. Our very perception of something as a choice needs to be understood against our whole situation including our bodily capabilities, our goals and plans, as well as our perceptions of ourselves, others and the world.

Let us take the case of rock-climbing as an informative example.^{xxxiii} A certain rock may appear to an individual as a challenge for climbing or a hindrance depending on what she wants to do. Also, if she wants to climb, certain rocks will stand forth as insurmountable depending on their size in relation to her lived body, in relation to her physical condition and how she has been taught to climb. More aspects can be added: it will matter whether someone else has already climbed here and left helpful signs of where to go, if the person wanting to climb has a long history of past rock-climbing family-members and friends who encourage her and support her in this practice. Furthermore, while climbing, she may find new routes and new moves that allow her to see rocks that previously looked scarily steep as calling for adventures. The attributes of the rock are conferred upon it by this person – as the particular lived body that she is – in the context of her climbing project.^{xxxiv} Arguably, the shape of her body and its way of being in the world can also inform whether signs left by others are perceived as helpful or not for her.

As another example, we may perceive a dark parking lot differently depending on for instance the way our bodies are sexed. The parking lot may be a public space that is constituted as off-limits and dangerous even though it is open and appears to be accessible. Ann Cahill argues that the threat of sexual assault is “a constitutive and sustained moment in the production of the distinctly feminine body.”^{xxxv} How we perceive the dark parking lot is not only informed by our own past experiences of

walking on empty sites at night but also on sedimented social and cultural sanctions of how different bodies are allowed to move in different spaces without being at the risk of assault. There is a social dimension to the emotion of fear and to perception of particular public spaces as threatening enough to avoid them, something that may happen without conscious reflection. While we are free to take the short cut across this empty place, there are nevertheless certain habituated favoured modes of withdrawing or reaching forward in particular spaces. With the words of Merleau-Ponty, our “freedom does not destroy our situation, but gears itself to it.”^{xxxvi} As discussed above, freedom is always situated but this is not to say that it is fixed, rather it continuously forms the situation in which it is formed. There is thus a double movement between freedom and facticity. While the way we are situated frames the way in which we perceive the world, others and ourselves, our situation is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, also “open” and we may act in unexpected and non-habituated ways. Furthermore, the openness of our situation implies that the situation as a whole cannot bring itself into being by itself, just as the embodied subject cannot bring herself into being by herself. This is to say that by being intrinsically open, our situation is always and necessarily tied to other situations. By stressing this openness, Merleau-Ponty points to the ever present possibilities of choosing otherwise while at the same time stressing the finitude of such possibilities, turning them into more or less likely probabilities. He also brings out the relationality of situations and the impossibility of isolating situations from one another.

Examinations of how sedimented injustices can inform the self’s perception, choice, and action, also bring out the intersubjective dimensions of one’s bodily style of being. If an individual has lived with social injustices for a longer period of time, they may be sedimented into her lived body and she may not see them as injustices in everyday situations until something happens that changes her perspective and lets her see them in this way. If she makes a decision under such circumstances, she may neither be forced nor manipulated into a particular decision. This situational whole informs what she perceives as possible alternatives in the first place in a way that does matter for autonomy discussions. Such an understanding of the situatedness of perception of alternatives can be contrasted with formal accounts of autonomy where subjects are understood as autonomous with regard to a certain decision if they have the ability and the opportunity to make and execute it. Such formulations down-play how perception, affect, intentionality, and intersubjectivity constitute part of the bodily subject’s situational whole in which she or he perceives something as a choice or possibility for

her- or himself; they gloss over the difference, relevant for autonomy discussions, between decisions I make in a cloistered situation and those I make in a less restricted one.

Autonomous choice may be hampered in various ways. Others may seek to make us live, act, choose in particular ways that we may not want ourselves; we may feel that we cannot act differently because of these others even if we are not de facto forced to act in one way or the other. While freedom, to return to the formulation earlier, may “gear” itself to our situation rather than turn it over, it is not at all given how freedom will gear itself towards any one specific situation. If for example, someone has “geared” their freedom to an oppressive situation – one that effectively denies the possibility of action that opens onto the future, then freedom may be said to have been suppressed. In such a situation, there may not be any perception of other alternatives.^{xxxvii} However, we may well imagine other situations in which there is no actual perception of other alternatives but that we may describe in terms of expressions of freedom rather than of inhibited freedom. Such an example may be the case of an individual sacrificing herself for a higher political goal, such as for instance suffragette women struggling for the right to vote.

In other cases, it may be that the situation is experienced as radically changing and perhaps forcing non-habituated action and movement. Even if my bodily style of being makes certain choices and decisions more likely for me than others, there is room for creativity, change and reflection. Phenomenological analyses have examined the often painful experience of no longer being able to live assumptions, norms or values about one’s own bodily existence, previously deeply rooted within and expressed or enacted with one’s body, and how this makes reflection possible. As an example, an individual identified as female who in adolescence comes to know that she has no womb or vagina will most likely come to experience her own bodily situation differently than before, and such an experience of radical change can trigger reflection on norms and values regarding sexed bodies.^{xxxviii} Another angle is offered by Elena Cuffardi in her work on “habits of transformation.”^{xxxix} Starting from the phenomenological insight that habit holds together stability and plasticity, sedimentation and change, Cuffardi turns to the pragmatist John Dewey’s analysis of “flexible habit” as the “mark of moral character.” In Dewey’s view, habits are always in play and “part of the moral activity is judging what to focus on and what to leave up to habit.”^{xl} Cuffardi combines Dewey’s focus on remaining open to new impulses that can

make us see things differently and that are crucially employed in “giving habits pertinence and freshness,” with Simone de Beauvoir’s focus on how the self as a mode of being can form herself by reaching for that which is not yet present, thereby reaching beyond the self. Through these combined perspectives, she argues for the importance of making reflection and questioning an embodied habit. Conscious cultivations of bodily habits, she suggests, can offer a “situated practice of resistance to stagnation.”^{xli} For the discussion of a bodily relational autonomy, this can be seen as a way to acknowledge the bodily dimension of perception, choice and action while also – if we successfully manage to make a questioning mode a habit – expanding the space of reflexivity and allow the development of skills for future decision-making together with others.

Finally, and since much of the autonomy literature discusses whether and, if so, what kind of reflection is required for a decision to qualify as autonomous, one more phenomenological insight is noteworthy. Merleau-Ponty suggests that we commonly are misled to think that voluntary deliberation precedes decision-making and is a matter of freely examining one motive after the other in search for the weightiest or most convincing. On his account, deliberation instead follows a pre-formed tacit decision, which draws attention to certain motives that forcefully either confirm or counter the latently present decision.^{xlii}

VI. Concluding remarks: what difference does it make?

We have argued above that bodily autonomy, which is always relational in a very basic sense, is expressed in at least three ways. First, when we act in habitual ways that once were the result of thought-through choices. Second, such habitual actions can be contrasted with actions that we have never perceived as open to choice: they may have become habituated and part of our lived body by mimicking and they may be detrimental, liberating or strengthening for the self and the other. Such actions are what we have discussed in terms of bodily style of being and they qualify as articulations of autonomy in so far as they are expressions of situated freedom. Even though such actions may be carried out without any reflection and may never actually change, the freedom in situation implies the possibility and potential of acting differently. Third, we have furthermore argued that actions can qualify as autonomous through the operative intentionality of the lived body. This is to broaden the scope of autonomous actions to include some of those that we “simply do,” and to allow for a differentiation between dimensions of bodily relational autonomy.

The account of bodily relational autonomy put forth here highlights how relational aspects are present in the formation of a bodily style of being and in the perception of something as a choice in a given situation. Freedom and subjectivity in this reasoning becomes situated, embodied and intersubjectively formed, as is also autonomy. To connect to a point we made in the beginning, we do not conceptualise autonomy in opposition heteronomy; rather, autonomy is inherently heteronomous in so far as it is situated. Thus, while we follow a tradition of arguing for freedom as a necessary condition for autonomy, we stress that freedom is always situated and only becomes meaningful as freedom in relation to facticity. The freedom conditioning autonomy is thus grounded in situations that are always relational and involve social, historical and cultural dimensions. To act autonomously is not to presume that one acts independently of others; instead, autonomous decisions are made in the midst of social relations, as responses to others, whose perceptions and actions inform mine. Independence can only be expressed and experienced as independence against the background of taken for granted dependencies, such as embodiment and situatedness.

A further important aspect, taking seriously sociality, is that autonomy to a great extent is something that is ascribed to a person from an outside perspective. There are many examples of how marginalized individuals and groups have been and are denied autonomy in different ways. Our discussion of a situated bodily relational autonomy, involving bodily reflection, open for the possibility of ascribing other forms of autonomy to such individuals and groups. At the same time, acknowledging bodily relational autonomy as situated and bound to facticity can also resist tendencies to ascribe in equal measure to all human beings what might be called a “neutral” non-situated rational autonomy. Ascribing such a detached disembodied autonomy to everyone without differentiation may lead to the serious consequence that oppressive situations are not made visible in their formative force. This may also lead to quite unreflective attitudes that a person could at any time have changed her situation or that staying in an oppressive situation is ultimately a matter of free choice. Such attitudes are founded in a rather groundless ideal of autonomy that does not take the facticity of situation and embodiment into consideration.

By bringing a phenomenological focus on the lived body into dialogue with a discussion on autonomy, we have articulated an account of bodily relational autonomy that can help us better understand how expressions of autonomy take place in different ways. This can contribute to both phenomenological and analytical discussions of

autonomy. Further, our account has broader implications for how we conceive of subjectivity. By taking the facticity of situation, embodiment and sociality into serious consideration we have argued for an understanding of subjectivity as inherently relational and constituted in relation to its whole situation, including its relation to others, its own bodily conditions and habituated ways of being in the world. Such an understanding challenges conceptions of subjectivity in terms of self-coincidence and atomistic independence, opening for further investigation into the constitutive relations between self, other and world, as well as the material and social conditions of consciousness.

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Endnotes

ⁱ See McLeod, C., *Self-trust and Reproductive Autonomy* (Cambridge, Mass and London: the MIT Press, 2002). See also Donchin, A., "Understanding Autonomy Relationally: Toward a Reconfiguration of Bioethical Principles," *Journal of Philosophy and Medicine* 26 (2001): 365-386; Mackenzie, C and N. Stoljar (eds) *Relational Autonomy. Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Christman, J., "Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism and the Social Constitution of the Selves," *Philosophical Studies* 117 (2004): 143–164; Mackenzie, C., "On Bodily Autonomy," in *Handbook of Phenomenology and Medicine*, ed. S.K. Toombs (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2008), 417-440.

ⁱⁱ For an exception to this tendency, see Mackenzie, "On Bodily Autonomy."

ⁱⁱⁱ Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 1962).

^{iv} Compare Beauchamp and Childress, *The Principles of Biomedical Ethics*.

^v E.g. Nordenfelt, L. *Action, Ability and Health: An Action-Theoretical Approach* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).

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- ^{vi} E.g. Dworkin, G. *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Frankfurt, H. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of the Person," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5-20.
- ^{vii} Freeman, L., "Reconsidering Relational Autonomy: A Feminist Approach to Selfhood and the Other in the thinking of Martin Heidegger," *Inquiry* 54 (2011): 361-383; Friedman, M., "Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique," in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1997), 40-61; McLeod, *Self-trust and Reproductive Autonomy*; Donchin, "Understanding Autonomy Relationally: Toward a Reconfiguration of Bioethical Principles;" Mackenzie and Stoljar (eds), *Relational Autonomy. Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*; Christman, J. "Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism and the Social Constitution of the Selves;" Sherwin, S (ed), *The Politics of Women's Health: Exploring Agency and Autonomy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
- ^{viii} See Mackenzie and Stoljar, *Relational Autonomy. Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*.
- ^{ix} Mackenzie, C., "On Bodily Autonomy," 432; Oshana, M.A.L., "The Autonomy Bogeyman," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 35 (2001): 209-226; Friedman, "Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique;" Friedman, M., "Autonomy, Social Disruption, and Women," in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 35-51; Freeman, L, "Reconsidering Relational Autonomy: A Feminist Approach to Selfhood and the Other in the thinking of Martin Heidegger;" Stoljar, N. "Informed Consent and Relational Conceptions of Autonomy," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 36 (2011): 375-384.
- ^x Mackenzie and Stoljar (eds), *Relational Autonomy. Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, 13.
- ^{xi} Mackenzie, "On Bodily Autonomy," 419.
- ^{xii} Mackenzie, "On Bodily Autonomy," 427.
- ^{xiii} Mackenzie, "On Bodily Autonomy," 432.
- ^{xiv} The idea of the body as a self-governing system has been developed for instance in terms of the idea of autopoiesis, originally introduced by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to explain the autonomous self-creative nature of living systems. See Maturana, H and F. Varela. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, volume 42 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980). The notion of autopoiesis has further been explored in a number of different areas and has recently been taken up by Joel Krueger and Dorothée Legrand in a discussion of relational autonomy.

Following Maturana and Varela, Krueger and Legrand suggest that autopoiesis in terms of structural coupling provides a way of enabling and securing autonomy by insisting on its relationality. They characterize the body as constitutively open on both an organic and an intersubjective level in order to establish the embodied self as “neither fully enclosed ‘inside’ [...] nor fully dissolved in or determined by what’s ‘outside.’” Instead self and other (inside and outside) are co-constitutive of one another through the structural coupling of their open bodies. The idea of autopoiesis resonates in several ways with Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of the lived body in terms of operative intentionality and double sensation, holding its own “kind of reflection”. See Krueger, J. and D. Legrand, “The Open Body,” in *Enacting Intersubjectivity: Paving the Way for a Dialogue Between Cognitive Science, Social Cognition, and Neuroscience*, eds. Antonella Carassa, Francesca Morganti, and Guiseppa Riva (Lugano: Universita della Svizzera Italiana, 2009), 111.

^{xv} Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 93.

^{xvi} Barbaras, R., *The Being of the Phenomenon* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 154f.

^{xvii} In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty in several places describes the body as “a sensible for itself” and “an exemplar sensible”.

^{xviii} Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 245.

^{xix} Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 441.

^{xx} Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 144.

^{xxi} Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 148.

^{xxii} See Ricoeur, P., *Oneself as Another* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

^{xxiii} Mackenzie and Stoljar (eds), *Relational Autonomy. Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, 13.

^{xxiv} Dekkers, W., “Persons with Severe Dementia and the Notion of Bodily Autonomy,” in *Supportive Care for the Person with Dementia*, eds. Julian Hughes, Mari Lloyd-Williams, and Greg Sachs (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 258.

^{xxv} Dekkers, “Persons with Severe Dementia and the Notion of Bodily Autonomy,” 257.

^{xxvi} Dekkers, “Persons with Severe Dementia and the Notion of Bodily Autonomy,” 258.

^{xxvii} Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 143.

^{xxviii} Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 442.

^{xxix} Singer, L., “Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style,” *Man and World* 14 (2001): 161.

^{xxx} Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 453.

^{xxxi} Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 453.

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- ^{xxxii} Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 439.
- ^{xxxiii} Sartre, J-P., *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992); Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*; Chisholm, D., “Climbing Like a Girl: An Exemplary Adventure in Feminist Phenomenology,” *Hypatia* 23 (2008): 9-40.
- ^{xxxiv} For a discussion of gendered dimensions of rock-climbing, see Chisholm, D., “Climbing Like a Girl: An Exemplary Adventure in Feminist Phenomenology.”
- ^{xxxv} Cahill, Ann. *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 161.
- ^{xxxvi} Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 442.
- ^{xxxvii} Weiss, G., Challenging Choices: An Ethic of Oppression, in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret Simons (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 241-261.
- ^{xxxviii} Zeiler, K. A Phenomenology of Excorporation, Bodily Alienation and Resistance. Rethinking Sexed and Racialized Embodiment, *Hypatia. A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 28(1): 69-84.
- ^{xxxix} Cuffardi, E. Habits of Transformation. *Hypatia. A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 26 (2011): 536.
- ^{xl} Cuffardi, “Habits of Transformation,” 538.
- ^{xli} Cuffardi, “Habits of Transformation,” 536.
- ^{xlii} Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 435.

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