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Relational Autonomy: A Spinozistic Approach
İlişkisel Otonomi: Spinozist Bir Bakış

Abstract

This paper examines a reconfiguration of the notion of Kantian autonomy with a feminist perspective. While most feminist philosophers have been suspicious about the concept as it is loaded with assumptions about selfhood, identity and agency that are metaphysically, epistemologically, ethically and politically problematic terms, some feminists argue that the notion is indispensable in understanding as well as fighting against the discrimination against and objectification of women. In doing so, some turn to Spinoza, arguing that Spinoza's notion of the self and his ethics can be helpful in rethinking the idea of the autonomous individual. Here the key term for connecting Spinoza's theory with the feminist approach on autonomy is "relational autonomy."

Öz

Bu makale Kantçı otonomi kavramının feminist bir bakış açısıyla yeniden yapılandırılmasını incelemektedir. Her ne kadar kimi feminist filozoflar kavramın kendilik, kimlik ve faillik ile ilgili birçok önkabulle yüklü olduğunu ve bu önkabullerin de metafizik, epistemolojik, etik ve politik açıdan problematik olduğunu iddia ederek kavrama şüpheyle yaklaşsalar da, kadının ezilmesi, nesneleştirilmesi ve ayrımcılığa uğramasının sebeplerini anlamada ve bunlara karşı mücadelede otonomi kavramının hayati bir öneme sahip olduğunu ileri sürerek kavramı tekrar yapılandırmamız gerektiğini iddia ederler. Bu yeniden yapılandırma aşamasında kimi filozoflar Spinoza'ya dönerek, Spinoza'nın kendilik kavramının ve etik anlayışının otonom bireyi feminist bir perspektiften yeniden düşünmeye yardımcı olacağını savunurlar. Burada Spinoza'nın teorisini feministlerin otonomiye yaklaşımına bağlayan anahtar terim "ilişkisel otonomi"dir.

Keywords
Autonomy, relational autonomy, affect, interrelatedness

Anahtar kelimeler
Otonomi, ilişkisel otonomi, affekt, ilişkisellik

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Introduction

One of the critical concepts in Kantian moral philosophy is autonomy, which presupposes that we are rational agents with free will through which we can transcend the domain of natural causation. This notion of autonomy and rationality has been challenged by Nietzsche who called for another approach centred on a notion of the self, which does not exclude the non-rational or even animalistic side of the human.

I will start with a distinction between ethics and morality, as well as a distinction between the ethical self and the ideal of the moral self. Here we will see that, in his critique of Kantian moral philosophy, Nietzsche does not abandon the idea of autonomy, rather he suggests a reconfiguration of it. This is also true of some feminist philosophers, whose work I will discuss in the second part. As we shall see, they want to retain the value of autonomy, as it involves a capacity for making one's self and life as well as for giving a law to oneself, a capacity through which women have rejected others' – men's – definitions of who they (each) are and instructions as to how they (each) should live. However, in doing so, they also want to emphasise the constitutive quality of sociality and the idea of the embodied self both of which have been ignored by traditional accounts of autonomy with its emphasis on the property of the rational will. In their attempt to rethink the autonomous individual some feminists turn to Spinoza's notion of the self and his ethics.

Morality vs. Ethics

Even though some philosophers use morality and ethics interchangeably, others claim that ethics cannot be reduced to morality, and that morality (e.g., Christian morality) has a narrower meaning than ethics. Bernard Williams, for instance, claims that morality needs to be regarded as a particular form of ethics (1985, p. 6). Morality concerns common rules or standards, while ethics is more about character; while morality is to do with social expectations, ethics focuses primarily on one's relationship with oneself. The Austrian novelist Robert Musil is another thinker who maintains the distinction between the two, arguing that the structure of morality is similar to that of the principle of repeatability, which is the precondition of the scientific thought. And thanks to this principle, our actions can be predictable, and also subject to control when necessary. Unlike the moralist, he further argues, the ethicist deals with the unprecedented, things that cannot be repeated, or, it may be added cannot be conceptualised (1998, p. 312).

I make this distinction because I am also making a distinction between the ethical self and the ideal of the moral self. I say "ideal" because the latter is based on the idea of the self as a cognitively unified and self-identical entity or as an entity which has an essence; this ideal of the self entails a particular understanding of morality (or the other way around): that is normative, universal, based on rationality while ignoring/neglecting, even degrading the emotional life. So, if we want to challenge and also problematize the ideal of universal morality,

first we need to problematise the ideal of the self as a cognitively unified entity; only then can we promote an ethics that welcomes the self (and the other in its otherness) with its contingencies, ambiguities, and uncertainties.

I have got Nietzsche in my mind here. Nietzsche argues that the idea of the self who is a psychologically and cognitively unified entity (the rational agent) needs to be replaced with the idea of the contingent self who is revealed in and through its deeds, whose deeds involve his/her desires, motives, instincts, as well as rationality. What does that mean? Well, Nietzsche had Kant in his mind.

In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant defines free will as a rational causality which can be efficient without being determined by alien causes that include our desires and inclinations (4:446, p. 94). Since only a rational being that has the capacity to act in accordance with reason has free will, it follows that it is only a rational being that can have freedom. What is the ground of free will? Free will must be self-determining, in other words, independent of the natural law of appearances or of natural causality, and yet since it is a causality it must act according to some law. Kant says: "Since the concept of causality brings with it that of laws in accordance with which, by something that we call a cause, something else, namely an effect, must be posited, so freedom. . . is not for that reason lawless but must instead be a causality in accordance with immutable laws but of a special kind" (4:446, p. 94). Now, if the will is free, then no principle can be ascribed to it from outside, and so Kant concludes that the freedom of the will must be autonomous which does not submit to anything beyond itself, such as desire or appetite, which are regarded as external or alien causes. To the question where this law comes from, Kant's answer is this: the will is a law itself which "indicates only the principle, to act on no other maxim than that which can also have as object itself as a universal law" (4:446, p. 94). This is the formula of the categorical imperative, and also the principle of morality: ". . . an absolutely good will is that whose maxim can always contain itself regarded as a universal law" (4:447, p. 95).

In the *Critique of Practical Reason,* Kant writes: "Pure reason is practical of itself alone and gives (to the human being) a universal law which we call the *moral law*" (5:32, p. 165). Kant argues that the moral law within me is something that all rational creatures accept as an ultimate fact of experience. He also suggests that moral obligation has a twofold character: on the one hand, it is the most familiar experience we have, that is, one connects it immediately with the consciousness of one's existence (5:162, p. 267); on the other, it is the uncanniest of all experiences. Obligation is both insistent and inescapable, a task that we are called to that distinguishes it from every determination of desire that issues from self-love. The moral law is a categorical imperative, that is to say, it commands us unconditionally and as such it is necessary and universal. At the same time, in the decision to obey or disobey we discover the possibility of our freedom, the possibility of raising ourselves above the sensible world (5:159, p. 267). Autonomous individuals act as both "sovereigns" and "subjects" if they obey the very law that they promulgate to themselves; they lead a life not restricted with the boundaries of animality, of the sensible world.

Thus, in Kantian morality the autonomous self or subject is a rational agent. We should insistently emphasise this: Nietzsche praises Kant for shifting this autonomy, the capacity to give oneself the moral law, from an external authority (God) and conferring it on humans. However, Kant is also part of the normative moral tradition that Nietzsche is trying to overcome. As a philosopher of autonomy himself, Nietzsche had an intermittent dialogue with Kant, and in some ways attempted to finish or even correct the project that Kant began. Nietzsche argues that on the one hand, Kant appreciates sovereignty and autonomy and makes them the focus of his philosophical project, but on the other, betrays sovereignty and autonomy by conflating them with the simple fulfilment of our rational nature. Nietzsche's main argument is this: we are not that rational! Kant, he argues, excluded our desires, motivations, emotions from the realm of morality but for Nietzsche this is impossible. Nietzsche is not making a normative claim here; in other words, he is not saying "we ought not to exclude desires, motivations etc. from the realm of morality"; rather he is making an ontological claim: "it is impossible to exclude them." What is it that he proposes then? In other words, what is Nietzsche's self and ethics? We said, it is the idea of the contingent self who is revealed in and through its deeds, whose deeds involve his/her desires, motives, instincts, as well as rationality. But what does it mean?

Nietzsche says, "you are what you do," meaning there is no self or subject that precedes its actions. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he insistently emphasises this: the subject and the deed are one and the same thing (I;13). This means, one's deeds cannot be separated from oneself and thus they express one's own self. The self for Nietzsche is a multiplicity of all its desires, inclinations, and motives; and though we are not that rational and may not always be aware of the motives behind our deeds, it is our responsibility to own them, rather than saying "I should have acted otherwise." Moreover, it is our ethical responsibility towards ourselves to try to understand why we acted in this or that way. Nietzsche simply proposes the following: first rather than saying "I should *not* have done so," own your action because it expresses you; then try to understand the motives, motivations, desires, even instincts behind this deed; and then work on your character, in other words, try to become *other* than yourself. This is a character-oriented ethics (as opposed to an action-oriented morality) and it is a life-long project. According to Nietzsche, the autonomous individual is someone who can even possess her past deeds and who tries to overcome her weaknesses; this is what the famous line from *Zarathustra* is about: "Thus I willed it" ("On Redemption"). Instead of regretting something that we did in the past, it is an attempt to embrace even the past action and try to change and transform your character. Thus, Nietzsche uses the language of liberal rationalism in order to suggest that autonomous individuals are not only capable of giving a law to themselves, or of making self and life rather than accepting the norms imposed upon them, but also of transvaluing values when necessary. Such transvaluation has been conducted by feminists in their reconfiguration of the term autonomy.

Following Nietzsche and Spinoza: Relational Autonomy

As we have seen Nietzsche does not abandon the idea of autonomy; rather he redefines it. Feminist philosophers did not abandon the notion either. Though, like Nietzsche, they were suspicious about it at first, because the notion presupposed a conception of the self as atomistic and self-sufficient, that is unaffected by social relationships, or as a rational agent stripped of undesirable influences (or external, alien causes in the Kantian sense) such as emotions, desires, motives. Recently, however, feminist philosophers have sought to recover, even rejuvenate, the notion, which has been dominant in the ideology of liberal individualism with its emphasis on the image of humans as self-determining, self-made and atomistic. So, in a way, there is a reconceptualization of autonomy from a feminist perspective. One may wonder why feminists were reluctant to abandon the notion altogether. One answer would be this: traditional accounts of autonomy assert a valuable human capacity, that is, the idea of making one's own self and life, a capacity through which women resist discrimination and oppression and define who they (each) are. Another answer, not unrelated to the first, would be a strategic one, namely, to draw on the authority of a term that has prevailed for years in philosophy and strengthened its place in the array of available concepts, and in doing so, to free the concept from its assumptions about selfhood and agency which fail to recognise the social nature of the human. Thus, the reconceptualization requires an elaboration of the concept as well as the deconstruction of the taken-for-granted values that define it. And here, the key connecting term is "relational autonomy." And "relationality" refers to the idea that individuals are socially and historically embedded and relational beings rather than metaphysically isolated ("atomistic") entities; and factors such as race, class, gender, ethnicity form and shape their subjectivities. In their reconfiguration of the notion some turn to Spinoza's notion of the self and his ethics.

In its broadest sense relational autonomy is defined as the following:

> . . . persons are socially embedded and that agents' identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Thus the focus of relational approaches is to analyse the implications of the intersubjective and social dimensions of selfhood and identity for conceptions of individual autonomy and moral and political agency (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000, p. 4).

How can Spinoza help in this? Aurelia Armstrong argues that "Spinoza's definition of the individual in terms of its power to affect and be affected contains a powerful alternative to a tradition of 'abstract individualism' that has tended to confuse autonomy with atomic isolation" (2009, p. 45). What is this power *to affect* and *be affected*?

In *Ethics* Spinoza emphasises two related points: 1) we think that we are free or freely self-determining because we are conscious of our desires and appetites, however in fact we are

ignorant of the causes through which they are determined; 2) we imagine ourselves as self-contained, independent entities, as well as self-caused, however, we are part of a whole rather than a whole entity in itself.

Now, these two points or errors are problematic for Spinoza not only for epistemological reasons but also, and more importantly, for ethical and political reasons. Armstrong writes: ". . . the more I imagine myself and others as independent sites of free causation, the more likely it is that my relationships will be marked by conflict and antagonism. And the greater the degree of conflict and antagonism between individuals, the less likely it is that they will be able to develop an adequate grasp of their interrelatedness" (2009, p. 51). So, a misconception of the self or our nature gives rise to serious political and ethical consequences: conflict, antagonism, maybe hatred etc. Thus, coming to an understanding of the nature of the self itself is an ethical project. It is our ethical duty towards ourselves to attempt to have a true knowledge of ourselves.

In order to understand the idea of the power to affect and be affected, in other words, interrelatedness, first we should emphasise that there is no separation between mind and body in Spinoza. Spinoza formulates this in different and technical ways in *Ethics*. I will not go into detail, but just note that the connection between mind and body is a kind of union; or whatever happens in the mind happens in the body and vice versa. Mind is the idea (or awareness) of the individual body, which is constantly affected by and affects other bodies, whether other bodies are human beings, non-human beings, objects, ideas etc. Mind is aware of the states of the body in two ways: 1. Through what the body is in itself (a certain motion and rest relationship between its parts); 2. Through the relationship between the body and other bodies, because each relationship leaves a trace on the body (whether the body affects another body or is affected by another body) through which the mind is aware of itself.

In *Ethics* Spinoza writes: "The human mind is capable of perceiving many great things, and is the more capable, the more its body can be disposed in a great many ways" (IIp14). This means, the more we have encounters with other bodies, the more there is possibility for us to understand our nature, as well as to increase our power of acting, that is, to move towards autonomy. I say possibility, because there might be some encounters which may diminish our power of acting (e.g., upset us), and we tend to avoid these encounters; however, for Spinoza this happens only because we do not attain a true knowledge of our nature. No encounter would diminish our power of acting, for instance upset us or frighten us, should we know the causes behind our emotional states. Nothing is frightful or fearsome in itself; it is our relationship with it, meaning it is one's relationship with oneself which causes fear, or anger or hatred in him/her.

I began with a distinction between morality and ethics; and I said that this distinction requires a distinction between two different accounts of the self: The Nietzschean or the Spinozistic ethics first requires an understanding of the particular relationship between the mind and the body. Traditionally, however, passions have been associated only with the body, or

the source of the passions was thought to be the body. For Descartes there are passions of the mind and actions of the mind. Passions of the mind are what we now call emotions: mind is passive, is driven to something because of the sensations which we perceive through the body whereas actions of the mind are thinking, willing, imagining etc. According to this view mind can act upon itself, be active while the body may not be affected by this mental process at all, that is passive (imagining something for instance). How? Because they are two distinct substances, as such subject to different mechanisms. In Kant through the capacity of understanding we make judgments which are actions of the mind. Thus, traditionally we have this action vs passion distinction. And this idea is closely related to the conception of the self as atomistic, self-sufficient or cognitively unified entity. How? Because here self is primarily, or even solely, identified with the mind, or with the faculties of the mind – this is what "I think therefore I am" is about – which, with the proper method, can be transparent to itself as well as can rule over the body, which is regarded as the source of emotions, desires, appetites, in other words, the source of the wrongdoing, even evil.

For Spinoza, however, there are only affects: 1. Affects which are passions; 2. Affects which are actions. Affects which are passions (or passive affects) are experienced in an encounter through which one develops an "understanding" towards another body through his/her/its effect on oneself. However, this "understanding" would not be adequate as it would enable me to develop only a partial knowledge about the nature of the other body, correspondingly about the nature of my own body. Affects cease to be passions through the knowledge of causation. Or we are active when something happens in us of which we are the adequate cause and this, above all, requires developing an understanding of the causes of our mental and emotional states, in other words, our nature. We need to reiterate this though: the understanding does not take place only in the mind; recall mind-body union; or the idea that whatever happens in the body happens in the mind and vice versa. We become more autonomous as we develop an understanding towards the sources of our appetites, motivations, desires, emotions etc. So, in Spinoza's ethics autonomy is not related with liberating ourselves from passions, that would be a task in vain anyway for in our everydayness we have countless encounters, some of which might be new, unknown, unexpected and therefore might affect us in a way that we might be passive. For instance, we might feel resentful towards someone, be angry with something or someone. These passions diminish our power of acting; we become passive. This is sadness. Autonomy is, however, to do with developing an understanding towards their causes, an understanding which brings in joy. What does that mean?

We tend to establish agreements with other bodies which bring in joy and in fact if we understand our nature properly, we will come to realise that we need other bodies. This is not an egocentric or self-centric approach; rather saying that thanks to agreements with other bodies, do we become joyful, for due to these agreements do we increase our power of acting. Armstrong writes: "Joy, for Spinoza, expresses a relation of agreement between bodies, it aids our power to understand what bodies have in common" (2009, p. 59). Note that power here

is not about a desire to dominate other people; it is about our relationship with ourselves, meaning a desire to enhance our power of acting which can only be realised through a joyful encounter (agreement) between me and the other, an encounter which enables me to develop a better understanding of my nature through commonness. This joyful encounter also increases the possibility of autonomous individuality, in other words, our becoming the cause of our actions. Here autonomy is not marked with isolation, but rather with interrelatedness. The feminist legal theorist Jennifer Nedelsky argues that feminist theory must retain the value of autonomy while rejecting the individualistic premises of liberal theory. She writes: ". . . relatedness is not, as our tradition teaches, the antithesis of autonomy, but a literal precondition of autonomy, and interdependence a constant component of autonomy" (1989, p. 12). In other words, "The collective is not simply a potential threat to individuals, but is constitutive of them, and thus is a source of their autonomy as well as a danger to it" (Nedelsky, 1989, p. 21).[1] How would it be a danger?

We referred to affects which are passions earlier: hatred, anger, jealousy etc. These passions diminish our power of acting and take us away from developing an understanding towards the nature of the self, hence towards autonomy. Think of someone who hates, is angry with, and is also resentful towards a particular group of people in a society even though he may not even have had any relationship with a particular individual from the same group (e.g., Racism). This person constructs a particular worldview marked with hatred, anger, resentment; this, however, is his/her worldview, which involves a particular participation into the world, or an apprehension of the world, which in turn gives way to a particular relationship with himself/herself. In this particular orientation towards the world, he/she may limit his/her encounters in life, and this person may live in a fixed and structured pattern which excludes many other possibilities. Is this a problem? Yes, because in such a world there is no place for openness towards new encounters, new associations, in other words, towards otherness. In such a world one can easily live without becoming other than himself/herself, which is a precondition for welcoming the other in his/her/its otherness. It is engaging in a world which has been shaped through "the emotions' [or the passions'] fixation" (Döring, 2013, p. 61).

Conclusion

I began with Nietzsche but mostly dwelled on Spinoza. This was not a random move, as Nietzsche himself is indebted to Spinoza, or at least to some of Spinoza's thoughts, in his critique of a particular notion of the self and morality, namely Kantian morality. Nietzsche, however, does not reject Kant's moral philosophy altogether. On the contrary, as a philosopher of autonomy himself, Nietzsche praises Kant for challenging the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' established conceptions of morality as obedience and replacing them with the idea of morality as self-governance[2] as well as for making autonomy the focus of his moral philosophy. Thus, Nietzsche does not abandon the notion, rather he seeks to reconfigure it,

an attempt that also requires a critique of the accepted conceptualisations about selfhood and agency. However, I argue that recently a more conducive and systematic discussion has been offered by some feminist philosophers, who, some inspired by Spinoza, seek to rejuvenate the notion by appealing to a characteristic as well as a capacity of the human: "interrelatedness" and "relationality." This is, however, not only an ontological but also an ethical claim: We are socially embedded creatures and social interactions can aid in developing a better understanding towards our nature, hence towards autonomy. Surely, we do not need Spinoza to emphasise our sociality, however, what makes the Spinozistic account valuable is that it enables us to extend the discussion to disadvantaged groups, non-human animals, even to inanimate objects, in short, to any kind of "other," for according to Spinoza being open to new encounters and new associations is the precondition for developing an adequate knowledge towards our nature. Thanks to this attitude can we enhance our power of acting, i.e., can one "become other than oneself." This is not a weird, or a magical transformation; it is simply an ethical relationship with ourselves which involves an effort at understanding our nature marked by our being sensitive, our capacity to be exposed to other bodies and which in turn gives way to an ethical relationship with others who are also sensitive. As Hans Jonas writes: "only by being sensitive can life be active, only by being exposed can it be autonomous" (1965, p. 56-57).

1 Nedelsky refers to the childrearing model in order to demonstrate the so-called potential danger. Parents are a source of child's autonomy but at the same time a potential threat to it: "It is easy to see that the powerful relationship of dependency children have with their parents is a necessary foundation for the child's autonomy. But the relationship can also be structured in ways that undermine autonomy, that maintain dependence. It is probably the case that all relationships necessary for autonomy can easily be perverted to undermine it" (1989, p. 21, ft).

2 On a detailed discussion about the difference between morality as obedience and morality as self-governance see Schneewind, 1997 and Skorupski, 2004.

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