Religion Faculty Publications   Department of Religion

8-1-2016

Mahmood, Liberalism, and Agency

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Abstract

In her book, *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood (1) challenges liberal views about agency, and (2) offers her own account of agency. This article argues that Mahmood's characterization of liberal agency is a caricature. Contrary to her view, liberalism isn't merely procedural but rather espouses stringent commitments toward protecting people's basic rights and liberties. This article then argues that her account of agency may entail practices decried by liberal and some feminist theorists. Specifically, practices that override one's status in moral and political communities cannot be defended on the grounds that they are necessary for particular forms of human flourishing.

Keywords: liberalism, feminism, Mahmood

Political philosophy has a not insignificant role as part of general background culture in providing a source of essential political principles and ideals. It plays a role in strengthening the roots of democratic thought and attitudes. This role it performs not so much in day-to-day politics as in educating citizens to certain ideal conceptions of person and political society before they come to politics, and in their reflective moments throughout life.
—John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*

One of the things this liberal tradition has emphasized is that people's preference for basic liberties can itself be manipulated by tradition and intimidation; thus a position that refuses to criticize entrenched desire, while sounding democratic on its face, may actually serve democratic institutions less well than one that takes a strong normative stand about such matters, to some extent independently of people's existing desires.
    —Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*

I.   **Introduction**

For moral and political liberals, human beings are one another's equals—that is, they have equal standing in moral and political communities.[1] For some liberal feminist theorists in particular this commitment suggests condemning settled beliefs and practices that discount women's lives. Islam's putative attitudes toward women have emerged as an especially salient target for such theorists. Consider one example. "It is difficult to imagine a worse fate for women than being pressured into marrying the man who has raped her," Susan Moller Okin writes, "[b]ut worse fates do exist in some cultures—notably in Pakistan and parts of the Arab Middle East, where women who bring rape charges quite frequently are charged themselves with the serious Muslim offense of *zina,* or sex outside of marriage." The punishment for bringing rape charges? Okin reports, "[l]aw allows for the whipping or imprisonment of such women, and culture condones the killing or pressuring into suicide of a raped woman by relatives intent on restoring the family's honor" (1999, 15–16). In their introduction to Okin's essay, "Is Multiculturalism Bad For Women?"[2] Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum expound on the women's movement and liberal feminist theory. They write:

> That movement condemned settled practice—stunning levels of violence against women, ceaseless efforts to turn women's sexuality into a special burden, and persistent disparities of economic opportunity— in the name of the radical idea that women are human beings, too; that they are the moral equals of men, owed equal respect and concern, and that women's lives are not to be discounted nor women be treated as a subordinate caste. (1999, 3)

I don't use these examples (or views about them) to cast aspersions on Islam more generally.[3] But one can begin to see why feminist and other liberal theorists have trouble with at least some of its prevailing beliefs and practices.

In her book, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), Saba Mahmood seeks to challenge liberal accounts about the relationship among religion, women, and agency. On her view, liberals ought to scrutinize their convictions about and privileging of "'secular-left' politics" over and against "other forms of human flourishing." Because of her ethno- graphic research in Cairo, Egypt, Mahmood has "come to believe that a certain amount of self-scrutiny and skepticism is essential regarding the certainty of [her] own

political commitments, when trying to understand the lives of others who do not necessarily share these commitments" (xi). Therefore, Mahmood expounds on "some of the conceptual challenges that women's involvement in the Islamic movement poses to feminist theory in particular, and to secular-liberal thought in general" (2). Such exploration, she argues, "speak[s] back to the normative liberal assumptions about human nature against which such a movement is held accountable" (5). By conversing with such assumptions, she seeks to "parochialize" them insofar as they "inform our judgments about nonliberal movements such as the women's mosque movement" (38).[4]

Despite the importance of her book, which continues to exert influence on religious ethics in particular and religious studies more generally, Mahmood is not without critics. Consider only a few examples. Elizabeth Bucar (2010, 672–75) expresses sympathy with Mahmood's project and under- lines its importance to contemporary religious ethics; however, she also high- lights the problematic ways in which Mahmood handles certain sources, especially Aristotle and Foucault, in developing her account of moral development. Other critics believe Mahmood's project fosters socio-ethical relativism. Matt Waggoner (2005) criticizes Mahmood for delimiting the extent to which one can engage in cross-cultural ethical analysis. Moreover, Sindre Bangstad (2011) notes, Mahmood's desire to sociohistorically situate her subjects offers few options for "outside" feminist analysis.

I also have reservations about Mahmood's argument, especially as it pertains and attempts to criticize liberalism.[5] To my mind, her comments about liberalism aren't convincing. Taking as my starting point Mahmood's desire to speak back to normative liberal assumptions, I explain why I am unconvinced.

In Section 2, drawing from John Rawls and other philosophers who have engaged his views, I explicate an account of liberalism in order to challenge Mahmood's claim that liberalism is merely procedural. On the contrary, I argue, liberalism includes stringent commitments to respecting people's basic rights and liberties,[6] which includes educating people to see both themselves and others as autonomous and equal members of moral and political communities. In Section 3, I argue that Mahmood's own account of agency, which includes "inhabiting norms," may entail many of the practices decried by liberal and some feminist theorists. On the liberal view that I develop, practices that override one's status in the political community cannot be defended on the grounds that they are necessary for particular forms

of human flourishing. Moreover, in arguing against liberalism's emphasis on autonomy and for inhabiting norms, Mahmood fails to identify cases in which women aren't exercising any form of agency. In advancing this argument, I defend two claims: (1) Mahmood's argument against liberalism turns on caricaturing it and therefore lacks polemical force; (2) her account of subversiveness, which seems to be an apologetics for certain forms of religious creativity,[7] results in reifying an illiberal and unequal status quo.[8]

2. Autonomy, Freedom, and Liberalism

Consider first Mahmood's characterization of liberal accounts of autonomy and freedom. "In order for an individual to be free," she writes:

> Her actions *must* be the consequence of her "own will" rather than of custom, tradition, or social coercion. To the degree that autonomy in this tradition of liberal political theory is a *procedural* principle, and not an ontological or substantive feature of the subject, it delimits the necessary condition for the enactment of the ethics of freedom. Thus, even illiberal actions can arguably be tolerated if it is determined that they are undertaken by a freely consenting individual who is acting of her own accord. Political theorist John Christman, for example, considers the interesting situation wherein a slave chooses to continue being a slave even when external obstacles and constraints are removed. (2005, 11)

In her description, Mahmood rightly distinguishes between autonomy and heteronomy.[9] But her subsequent evaluation contains several problems, which seem to be rooted in her erroneous conviction that liberalism is merely procedural. One conspicuous problem is that she fails to distinguish between autonomy as an end state and autonomy as a side constraint. On liberal views, individual autonomy and equality are protected through basic rights and liberties that cannot be yielded. On the side constraint view, then, certain sorts of autonomous actions, whether they affect only the individual agent himself or herself or others, are precluded. Though not a liberal himself, Robert Nozick offers a succinct definition of the side constraint view: "The rights of others determine the constraints upon your actions.   The side constraint forbids you to violate these moral constraints in the pursuit of your goals" (1974, 29). Therefore, one cannot, in the pursuit of one's own goals, override another's status in the

moral and political communities.[10]

 To better appreciate what I mean, consider a crass example: consensual cannibalism. For liberals, such a practice, which overrides one's standing in the moral and political communities, isn't permissible despite one's autonomy and freedom. Even if the agents in such a case contracted with one another— that is, that one agent would kill the other and eat him or her—doesn't make it morally permissible. Such arrangements constitute a violation of basic liberties. On the relationship between basic liberties and contracts, consider Rawls's view:

 To say that the basic liberties are inalienable is to say that any agreement by citizens which waives or violates a basic liberty, however rational and voluntary this agreement may be, is void *ab initio*; that is, it has no legal force and does not affect any citizen's basic liberties. Moreover, the priority of the basic liberties implies that they can- not be justly denied to anyone, or to any group of persons, or even to all citizens generally, on the grounds that such is the desire, or overwhelming preference, of an effective political majority, however strong and enduring. The priority of liberty excludes such considerations from the grounds that can be entertained. (1996, 365)[11]

 Consent therefore isn't a necessary or sufficient condition for certain sorts of interactions, for example, slavery or consensual cannibalism, whether they are instantiated interpersonally or institutionally. In this class of cases, the contracting agents override the side constraints on action and, therefore, the moral status people possess. In the case of slavery, an agent's claims to equality of interests, which include his or her autonomy and equality in moral and political communities, aren't taken seriously. For liberals, then, one's actions aren't morally permissible simply by virtue of following some procedure, for example, a libertarian contract. Non-pure procedural accounts of liberalism turn on deeper moral and political values, which are necessarily antecedent to (and therefore must be present in) whatever decision procedure one employs.[12] Such values are especially important when considering the "roles" one is "assigned" in society. On liberal views, one ought to be able to pursue what- ever good one wishes, regardless of some morally arbitrary characteristic, for example, gender, sex, race, or religion. But this often isn't the case. Instead, one or more of these morally arbitrary characteristics often wrongfully delimits one's options.[13] On a woman's place in her family and society, for example,

 Okin writes:

We live in a society that has over the years regarded the innate characteristic of sex as one of the clearest legitimizers of different rights and restrictions, both formal and informal. While the legal sanctions that uphold male dominance have begun to be eroded in the past century, and more rapidly in the last twenty years, the heavy weight of tradition, combined with the effects of socialization, still works powerfully to reinforce sex roles that are commonly regarded as of unequal worth and prestige. The sexual division of labor has not only been a fundamental part of the marriage contract, but so deeply influences us in our formative years that feminists of both sexes who try to reject it can find themselves struggling against it with varying degrees of ambivalence. Based on this linchpin, "gender"—by which I mean *the deeply entrenched institutionalization of sexual difference*—still permeates our society. (1989, 5–6)[14]

To suggest that someone might choose, "autonomously," to be a slave himself or herself or subject others to a life of slavery highlights the extent to which tradition and socialization can have corrosive effects. In these instances, one is overriding either one's own or another's basic rights and liberties. Moreover, if socialization and tradition causally contributed to one's desire to be a slave, one isn't acting autonomously at all. Instead, one is acting heteronomously. Similar to Okin's characterization about the institutionalization of sexual difference, one's options come prepackaged, fixing one's role in society. On this view, one simply can't remove external constraints and obstacles and believe in an agent's ability to honor his or her standing in moral and political communities.

Given the extent to which tradition and socialization can pervasively affect not only oneself but also others, people must develop into autonomous agents, especially with respect to two ideas: (1) toward respecting one's own autonomy and moral status; and (2) toward respecting others' autonomy and moral status. Liberal theorists highlight the costs that attend the lack of such an education. On one's own autonomy and moral status, for example, con- sider Martha Nussbaum's account of "deformed preferences." She writes:

Like many women, [Vasanti] seems to have thought that abuse was painful and bad, but still a part of women's lot in life, just some- thing women have to put up with as part of being women dependent on men, and entailed by having left her own family to move into a husband's home. The idea that it was a violation of rights, of law, of justice,

and that she herself has rights that are being violated by her husband's conduct— these ideas she didn't have at that time, and many many women all over the world don't have them now. My universalist approach seems to entail that there is something wrong with the preference (if that's what we should call it) to put up with abuse, that it just shouldn't have the same role in social policy as the preference to protect and defend one's bodily integrity. It also entails that there is something wrong with not seeing oneself in a certain way, as a bearer of rights and a citizen whose dignity and worth are equal to that of others. (2000, 113)

Such deformed preferences affect how one conceives of oneself and one's standing in moral and political communities. Nussbaum importantly notes how socialization and tradition can have adverse effects on how women conceive of themselves against the backdrop of their broader culture. There are also prudential risks involved in how one regards others. For example, Allen Buchanan recounts growing up in the American South during the 1950s and 1960s

in a racist family culture embedded in a society of institutionalized racism. Blacks were relegated to separate and inferior schools, were effectively excluded from voting, and could not use the same restrooms, hotels, or restaurants as whites. I was taught, by explicit dogma and by example, to regard blacks as subhuman. Unlike my mother, I never witnessed a lynching, but I did once see a desiccated, severed black ear of unknown provenance, proudly displayed by a white junior high school classmate. I also recall joking with my friends about the "Tucker telephone," a crank operated dynamo that was used to deliver electrical shocks to the genitals of black inmates of a nearby penal farm.

Largely through luck, I left this toxic social environment at the age of eighteen and came to understand that the racist world view that had been inculcated in me was built on a web of false beliefs about natural differences between blacks and whites. My first reaction was a bitter sense of betrayal: Those I had trusted and looked up to—my parents, aunts and uncles, pastor, teachers, and local government officials—had been sources of dangerous error, not truth. (2004, 95)[15]

Both Nussbaum and Buchanan emphasize the extent to which socialization and tradition can negatively impact not only how one acts but also what one believes, including how one views both oneself and others. On the examples of slavery and consensual cannibalism, the liberal view aims to protect people's autonomy and equality. But the liberal view also seeks

to educate people about the moral status both of themselves and others with whom they share these communities. Absent such training, "the risk is not simply that one will come to have false beliefs, but that the same social processes that instill false beliefs will make it difficult to correct them" (Buchanan 2004, 97).

Unlike Mahmood's characterization, then, liberalism isn't merely procedural; rather, it turns on certain substantive norms. First, these norms are instantiated in coercive public policy, which identifies and assigns to people basic liberties and rights. Such coercive policies therefore rule out certain sorts of contractual arrangements that would override these liberties and rights. In other words, coercive public policy recognizes and aims to protect the equal moral status that obtains among people in a society. Second, these substantive norms, which include recognizing and respecting one another as equal members of the moral and political communities, are inculcated through and respected by social processes that further foster and uphold them. Taken together, these two claims aim to establish the fixity of equal moral status among members of moral and political communities. If Mahmood wishes to claim that such commitments toward treating and viewing others as having equal moral status *ought*, normatively, to be viewed as parochial, then the burden of proof remains with her to argue why this is the case.[16]

3.   Mahmood on Agency and Subjectivity

"Agency," according to Mahmood's characterization of liberal agency, "is understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective). Thus the humanist desire for autonomy and self-expression constitutes the substrate, the slumbering ember that can spark to flame in form of an act of resistance when conditions permit" (2005, 8). For her, the liberal view is one of autonomy and not heteronomy. But she wonders "whether it is even possible to identify a universal category of acts—such as those of resistance—outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their particular meaning" (9).[17] Consequently, an account of agency cannot be fixed in advance; rather, it must "emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity" (14–15).

Therefore, Mahmood's ethnographic research in Cairo turns on a desire to understand

the women involved in the mosque movement in their own context and on their own terms. In contrast with the liberal view, Mahmood comments on the women involved in the mosque movement:

> What may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the dis- courses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms. (2005, 15)

Her reason for examining agency in this way turns on a desire to understand agency in a particular discursive context; it also turns on "the construction of particular kinds of subjects, subjects whose political anatomy cannot be grasped without applying critical scrutiny to the precise form their embodied actions take" (24). What can be drawn from these claims? On my reading, Mahmood believes that her ethnographic study will broaden one's under-standing of agency—that is, agency is not only the resistance to norms but also the inhabitation of them.

Mahmood's term for her account of agency is the "feminist subject." On her view, one's agency is historicist and contingent. Drawing from Aristotle, Bourdieu, and Foucault, Mahmood uses the following example in order to explicate her conception of agency:

> We might consider the example of a virtuoso pianist who submits herself to the often painful regime of disciplinary practice, as well as to the hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability—the requisite agency—to play the instrument with mastery. Importantly, her agency is predicated upon her ability to be taught, a condition classically referred to as "docility." Although we have come to associate docility with the abandonment of agency, the term literally implies the malleability required of someone in order for her to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge—a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity than one of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement. (2005, 29)

How is this characterization of agency manifested in religious practice? On the bodily dimension of agency, Mahmood writes, "a central aspect of ritual prayer . . . is that it serves both as a means to pious conduct and as end. In this logic, ritual prayer (*salat*) is an end in

that Muslims believe God requires them to pray, and a means insofar as it transforms their daily action, which in turn creates or reinforces the desire for worship. Thus, the desired goal (pious worship) is also one of the means by which that desire is cultivated and gradually made desirable" (133).

Ostensibly, cultivating virtuous dispositions is (maximally) laudable and (minimally) not morally impermissible. Mahmood describes the sorts of activities in which the women involved in the mosque movement engage, including, for example, consuming religious media, educating one another about the jurisprudential tradition, and leading prayers. None of these activities seem to conflict with liberal commitments to basic liberties and rights. But Mahmood's characterization nonetheless raises some concerns. For example, what if the practices one must engage in for self-cultivation require one to override one's basic liberties and rights? Consider Mahmood's piano example. On its face, there is nothing wrong with learning to play the piano. But what if the only skill one was allowed to develop, because of one's gender, sex, or race, is playing the piano? Moreover, what if one or another tradition deter- mined who could pursue which skill on these terms? On the liberal view that I developed in Section 2, this delimited case *is* morally impermissible. Because of some morally arbitrary characteristic, one is precluded from pursuing other goods. To return to Okin's phrasing, one's role and the goods that attend that role are institutionalized.

Such institutionalized practices, then, may reify paternalistic social and political structures. Consider the following case. Two parents decide to have a child. On an admittedly simple picture of parenthood, the parents must undertake certain activities with regard to their child's well-being—for example, preparing healthy meals, tending to the child when he or she is ill, and reading to the child at bedtime. These are the activities one must assume in order to be a good parent. But what if one or another tradition dictated that these activities must only be tackled by the child's mother? On this picture, because she is a woman, the child's mother *must* pursue this good—that is, by virtue of being a female, the child's mother must undertake certain activities with regard to her child. On my view, it would be morally permissible for her to pursue some things that fall under the umbrella of this good—for example, preparing healthy meals—because she is better at them than her husband. But this is not concomitant with the fact that she is a woman. If some heteronomous source were to dictate that she must, because she is a woman, pursue this one good, then this would be morally impermissible. Moreover,

being forced by tradition to pursue this one good prevents her from pursuing other goods. Such practices not only reify paternalistic social and political mores but also override the woman's basic liberties and rights.[18]

The ways in which tradition may delimit one's options lead to problems with heteronomy more generally. In developing her own account of religious women's agency, for example, Elizabeth Bucar comments on the advantages of heteronomy. "In terms of moral discourse," she writes, "heteronomy can conceive of an agent who accepts the authority of a cleric, in contrast to autonomy that would mark her as having a false consciousness" (2010, 671; cf. Schofer 2012, 6). Turning to heteronomy instead of autonomy, she adds, will preclude one from "automatically dismissing those parts of [religious women's] moral discourse that essentialized women's roles in the family" and would allow one instead "to consider them as part of [their] authentically held vision of womanhood" (671). I concur with Bucar that one needs to hear out and attempt to understand another tradition prior to dismissing one or another claim. But there are two further aspects of her view that need to be considered. The first aspect concerns the conditions according to which someone could accept the authority of a cleric. First, the cleric ought not recommend something that would override one's basic liberties or rights. For example, if the cleric were to prescribe that one immolate oneself, then one would have to reject that prescription because it overrides one's basic liberties. Second, one could accept the authority of a cleric and what the cleric recommends if one had reason to accept what the cleric recommends independently of the cleric recommending it. In other words, the cleric would have to proffer what would be rationally acceptable to the agent independent of the cleric proffering it. The motivational force, then, would derive not from the cleric but from what the cleric recommends itself.

Why highlight the motivational force? One reason to highlight the motivational force is to avoid undue "epistemic deference" to an authority. On Allen Buchanan's definition, epistemic deference is "the disposition to regard some other person or group of persons as especially reliable sources of truths. Social institutions that recognize some persons as experts encourage this sort of deference" (2002, 136). To be sure, there is a range of cases in which one must epistemically defer to others. For example, when one visits a doctor, one must defer to the doctor's medical expertise. But deferring to a doctor's medical expertise isn't tantamount to accepting whatever the doctor prescribes as the course of action. For example, if one were to

receive some diagnosis and accept without question the doctor's only prescribed course of action, when in reality there are other possible courses, would be to capitulate to the doctor's paternalistic opinion. In other words, one would pursue a course of action because one deferred to the doctor's authority. Judging whether an epistemic authority's judgment is warranted is especially important when the doctor's prescription is contrary to what is in one's own best interest.

Bucar's reading of Mahmood, however, seems to forestall this reading. She writes: "Mahmood's heteronomous ethical project sees rationality as situated. This understanding of rationality is enormously important in helping us understand specific rhetorics within religious communities, the logics each rhetorical performance entails, and the local assumptions that rhetoric attempts to access in order to persuade" (2010, 671). This description leads me to the second of Bucar's claims that needs to be unpacked. Specifically, Bucar comments on her interview with Shahla Habibi, who was the special advisor on women's affairs to former Iranian President Hashimi Rafsanjani, during which she refers to Habibi as an "Islamic Feminist" (664). Reflecting on this episode, Bucar highlights the terms of conversation she presupposed when interviewing Habibi. Given her own commitments, which she believes betray her "conceptual ignorance" and "perhaps arrogance" (664), Bucar says she may dismiss religious women's views about womanhood.

But this admission raises two questions. First, couldn't Habibi have pre- supposed her own view of agency and therefore rejected Bucar's "Western" view? Indeed, Habibi's response to Bucar would seem to suggest so: "I am not a feminist. Do not call me a feminist. I do not believe in *your* feminism" (quoted in Bucar 2010, 664; emphasis mine). Second, if rationality is socio- historically situated, does this reduce to the idea that one can't make useful generalizations across cases? If so, can one ever normatively assess anyone out- side of one's own localized context? If Mahmood (and others) wish to speak back to normative liberal assumptions regarding autonomy, then these are questions that need to be answered.

Consider in closing some worries about which Mahmood's account seems curiously silent. On Mahmood's view, agency does not just entail resistance to norms but also includes some forms of docility and malleability—that is, one *inhabits* norms, whether cultural, religious, or social. Some of the women she surveys discuss the ways in which they struggle with what tradition expects of them (see, e.g., 2005, ch. 4). Does such struggle highlight the extent to which

some norms do in fact run contrary to one's own interests? In other words, one's struggle doesn't suggest that one hasn't yet acquired the ability to inhabit that norm but rather that a particular norm isn't consistent with one's own views about the good. To defend against such a possibility, let me propose three conditions. One could inhabit a norm if these three conditions were satisfied:

1. Whatever norm one wishes to inhabit doesn't override one's basic liberties and rights;

2. One should not be expected to inhabit a norm because of some morally arbitrary characteristic, for example, one's sex, race, or religion; and

3. If one should wish to stop inhabiting a norm, then one ought to be allowed to do so.

Given her commitments to heteronomous ethics, it remains uncertain whether Mahmood (or others committed to heteronomous ethics) would endorse these conditions.

There is also a deeper puzzle about whether one could ever identify an absence of agency. That is to say, since one not only resists norms but also inhabits them, Mahmood argues for a broader conception of agency. But is her account therefore so capacious that it would be impossible ever to identify an absence of agency? For example, one could see the merits in, for example, wearing a veil or practicing being shy and therefore inhabit those norms. But what if one didn't see the merits in these norms? Hypothetically, one could simply "inhabit" these norms in order to avoid being religiously or socially ostracized. If one isn't able to differentiate between an exercise of agency and an absence of agency, however, Mahmood's account would seem to be too capacious. Therefore, it couldn't be deemed to be doing any useful analytic work.

Finally, given Mahmood's own commitments to feminism, is there any relation to social norms that should be considered out of bounds? For example, would a woman being pressured by her family members into marrying her rapist, despite what one or another tradition may dictate, be considered morally impermissible? Should one turn to the context in which those events happened to discern why? Or would it suffice to say that certain liberal norms, for example, bodily integrity, are necessary across all discursive contexts? If Mahmood were to agree that such liberal norms are necessary, then how should one read her claim that she wishes to parochialize them?[19]

4.   Conclusion

In sum, Mahmood is uncomfortable with a liberal account of autonomy, which she believes ought to be regarded as parochial. She seeks a rooted- ness in distinct discursive contexts. But what if these discursive contexts are gravely illiberal, and the subversion that occurs within them includes self- sustaining subordination? By acting only within their subordinated space, the women Mahmood studies reify paternalistic social and political structures. Consequently, they aren't sufficiently free to engage with others as moral and political equals and to advance their standing in the moral and political com- munities. Moreover, committing themselves to religious practices that, at least in some instances, are unjust brings them into conflict with liberal commitments. These liberal commitments don't privilege autonomy as an end state and therefore can't commend some interactions regardless of the worthy ends they seek to bring about. In the name of acquiring some desirable dispositions, one can't (willingly) override one's standing in the human moral and political communities. The enduring struggle is reconciling these liberal mores with the intuitions I have concerning contexts that are illiberal in belief and practice. Subversiveness shouldn't be satisfied with reifying the status quo.[20]

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Notes

1.   "In contemporary Western societies," Jeff McMahan writes, "common sense morality is liberal egalitarian in character. With the possible exception of human beings in their embryonic or fetal stages, all human beings are recognized—in principle if not in practice—as one another's moral equals. Each human being matters equally; each has equal value and equal human rights" (2008, 81).

2.   For two other prominent commentaries on the relationship among democracy, liberalism, and multiculturalism, see Kymlicka 1996 and Barry 2002.

3.   I also do not intend to delimit feminist and liberal criticisms to Islam (or predominantly Islamic societies) exclusively. For example, Okin 1989 details the ways in which

American women have been precluded from equal standing in the moral and political communities; and Martha Nussbaum 2000 and Katherine Boo 2012 highlight similar issues confronting Indian women.

4. "Within our secular epistemology," she writes, "we tend to translate religious truth as force, a play of power that can be traced back to the machinations of economic and geopolitical interests" (2005, xi). On my reading, her characterization of "secular epistemology" seems to be wedded to some broadly Marxist commitments. I am unsure what criteria Mahmood uses to claim that such commitments are "our" commitments, epistemologically or normatively. Moreover, despite her stated aim to speak back to normative liberal assumptions, Mahmood discusses neither John Rawls (1996, 1999) nor Okin (1989, 1999), who are both among the most prominent contemporary liberal theorists. This remains the case for the 2011 reprint of her book.

5. In articles that have appeared since the publication of her book, Mahmood covers, e.g., secularism in relation to "current strategies of domination pursued by the United States" (2006, 328), the contestation between the secular public sphere and religious expression (2009), and the role of the state in protecting (or prohibiting) the freedom of religion (2012). She discusses (and problematically often fails to distinguish among) liberalism, leftism, and secularism. Since many of the topics with which she concerns herself are beyond my ambit, I will restrict myself to the views about agency she develops in her book.

6. On basic rights and basic liberties, consider the following definitions. Henry Shue defines basic rights as follows: "When a right is genuinely basic, any attempt to enjoy any other right by sacrificing the basic right would be quite literally self-defeating, cutting the ground from beneath itself. Therefore, if a right is basic, other, non-basic rights may be sacrificed, if necessary, in order to secure the basic right. But the protection of a basic right may not be sacrificed in order to secure the enjoyment of a non-basic right. It may not be sacrificed because it cannot be sacrificed successfully. If the right sacrificed is indeed basic, then no right for which it might be sacrificed can actually be enjoyed in the absence of the basic right. The sacrifice would have proven self-defeating" (1996, 19).

In his theory of justice, Rawls believes that all citizens "have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others" (1999, 53). For him, basic liberties include "freedom of thought and liberty of conscience; the political liberties and

freedom of association, as well as the freedoms specified by the liberty and integrity of the person; and finally, the rights and liberties covered by the rule of law" (1996, 291). On the special status afforded to basic liberties, see Rawls 1996, Lecture VIII, Section 2.

7.   There is some interpretative controversy regarding Mahmood's project. On my reading, Mahmood takes up two interrelated tasks. (1) From a socio-anthropological perspective, she is interested in excavating and recording, descriptively, the ways in which women in Cairo, Egypt, create and employ meaning and then manage their social systems by those creations. She could be read, therefore, as recording history: how things are done by a particular group of people in a particular place at a particular time in history. (2) She draws from these socio-anthropological data in order to argue, normatively, that these practices challenge liberal out- looks. In other words, she is drawing from her analytic and descriptive account in order to inform an evaluative and prescriptive one. Her move from (1) to (2), on my view, opens her up for criticism. Thanks to Travis Cooper for this helpful characterization.

In recent religious ethics, this reading of Mahmood isn't an idiosyncratic one. For example, commenting on the relationship between anthropology and eth- ics in recent religious ethics, John Kelsay observes that thinkers, for example, Mahmood, who are trained primarily as anthropologists, are "read as *ethicists*" (2010, 485). Following Mahmood's participation in the 2009 Moral Worlds and Religious Subjectivities Conference at Harvard Divinity School, he further comments: "I should say that this is the way Mahmood, in particular, represented her work" (2010, 485; see also Kelsay 2010, 490n3).

8.   I would like to forestall one potential criticism. One might ask me to comment on the debate among Mahmood, Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault. I don't have a stake in this intramural debate, and thus will not engage it. I will focus narrowly on the debate between the "liberal" position—a position that I will explicate, in Section 2, through discussing Rawls and his commentators—and Mahmood's position.

9.   In the *Groundwork* (1999), Kant distinguishes between "autonomous" and "heteronomous" actions. On the one hand, autonomy tracks "the property of the will by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition)" (89; G 4:440). Rational moral agents, on his view, act according to the moral law—i.e., they give and constrain themselves to the moral law. Heteronomy, on the other hand, tracks a property whereby people aren't governed by the self- given moral law; rather, they are governed by some

external force or authority (92; G 4:444). For Kant, moral agents must act autonomously in order to act in accordance with the supreme moral principle. On whether autonomy is a substantive feature of individual people, cf. Rawls: "acting justly is something we want to do as free and equal rational beings. The desire to act justly and the desire to express our nature as free moral persons turn out to specify what is practically speaking the same desire" (1999, 501).

10. Nozick does endorse the view, however, that one may do whatever one wants with one's *own* body: "any individual may contract into any particular constraints over himself." Therefore, "a free system will allow him to sell himself into slavery" (1974, 331). Liberals endorse Nozick's exposition of side constraints while rejecting his notion of self-ownership. On the contrast between liberalism and libertarianism, see Freeman 2001.

11. Though Rawls is concerned, specifically, with a political community, his claim is generalizable to the moral community.

12. For one recent criticism of proceduralism, and an argument for non-proceduralism, see Brettschneider 2007. On his view, "liberal rights do not con- strain democracy; they are required by it.   These values are central to the

idea of democracy because they support the notion of democratic citizens as free, equal, and reasonable rulers. My thesis is that the core values require the guarantee of substantive individual rights as well as rights to participate in democratic procedures" (9). For a recent defense of proceduralism, see Estlund 2009. For an overview and assessment of the debate between proceduralists and non- proceduralists, see Beerbohm 2011.

13. On the relationship among beliefs, roles, and human freedom, see Cohen 1966.

14. In a recent comparative study, Bucar (2012) challenges the idea that sex itself is an "innate" or "natural" characteristic. Nonetheless, I think Okin's distinction between sex and gender is useful when thinking about the ways in which roles are assigned and institutionalized. Compare Okin's view (1989, 1994, 1995, and 1999) to Mahmood's own: "My intention here is not to question the profound transformation that the liberal discourse of freedom and individual autonomy has enabled in women's lives around the world, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which these liberal presuppositions have become naturalized in the scholarship of gender" (2005, 13).

15.   On social moral epistemology, see also Buchanan 2002 and 2009.

16.   "Western intellectuals," Jonathan Schofer writes, "must work to counter the ways that liberal ideas of freedom, equality, and secularity can be co-opted by neo- colonial agendas" (2012, 5–6). Schofer's point is an important cautionary note. But I would add one qualification: liberals ought not posit a robust account of the good over and against other possible goods that one may wish to pursue. Thus, liberalism may be viewed as a minimal set of commitments—i.e., one may pursue whatever goods one wishes insofar as the pursuit of that good doesn't necessarily entail overriding people's, including one's own, basic liberties and rights.

17.   Here, Mahmood follows Talal Asad's (1986) definition of a "discursive tradition." "A discursive tradition," on his definition, "connects variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the pro- duction of appropriate knowledges" (7).

18.   On how women are made vulnerable by marriage, see Okin 1989, ch. 7. Marriage may also spark certain abuses toward women because they are not good mothers or housekeepers. See Section 2 for my discussion of Nussbaum's example of Vasanti.

19.   After saying that she doesn't endorse the pious lifestyle of the women she studies, Mahmood notes: "If there is a normative political position that underlies this book, it is to urge that we—my reader and myself—embark upon an inquiry in which we do not assume that the political positions we uphold will necessarily be vindicated, or provide the ground for our theoretical analysis, but instead hold open the possibility that we may come to ask of politics a whole series of questions that seem settled when we first embarked upon the inquiry" (2005, 39). I appreciate Mahmood's admission. Nonetheless, given her desire to speak back to normative liberal commitments drawing from her ethnographic study, I believe that her position is more explicitly normative than she herself suggests. Moreover, in her own explication of women's agency, she leaves more unexplained than explained.

20.   I presented earlier versions of this essay at the University of Notre Dame's Moral Theology Colloquium (2014), the Religion and Politics Section at the American Academy of Religion (2013), Indiana University's Religious Studies Graduate Student Colloquium (2013), and Florida State University (2012). Thanks to audience members and colloquium participants for their comments and questions. Many thanks to

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