

## Female Suicide Bombers and Autonomy

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## **6. Female suicide bombers and autonomy**

**Herjeet Marway**

### **Introduction**

My aim in this chapter is to consider which theoretical understandings of autonomy are useful and appropriate for interpreting real-life violent women and for attributing them with autonomy where this might be fitting. I focus on the example of female suicide bombers because such women are often denied agency, as I will show. And – insofar as our goal in this collection is to recognise agency – if they and their actions can be better illuminated on certain philosophical frameworks, then such approaches, I argue, are to be preferred. To explore this, I first briefly illustrate the tendency to distort the agency of the bombers. I second examine which theoretical models of relational autonomy, procedural or substantive, might more fully represent their autonomy. I argue that common understandings of female bombers are problematic because they are based on societal (patriarchal, oppressive) norms about what women should be or can do, and that procedural theories of autonomy less satisfactorily capture the social self and degrees of autonomy than substantive notions. Thus, if better representations of the autonomy of violent women are being sought, substantive relational theories of autonomy should be preferred over procedural ones.

### **Female suicide bombers**

To start, I briefly present some examples of bombers from differing regions, conflicts, and organisations, and I draw attention to how they are portrayed, concentrating on

some (I do not claim they are the only) depictions in the West to illustrate dominant trends.

(a) Three examples

The first example is Muriel Degauque, a 38-year-old Muslim convert originally from Charleroi, Belgium. On November 9 2005, she detonated a bomb close to American troops and Iraqi police in Baqubah, Iraq. Degauque died in the attack and one American soldier sustained minor injuries. She was the first known Caucasian female suicide bomber claimed by al-Qaeda and her instructions were believed to be from Jordanian militant, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Eager 2008, 171; Skaine 2006, 55-6; Cunningham 2008, 95; Zedalis 2008, 59; Browne and Watson 2005; Smith 2005).

The second example is the double suicide-bombing attack in central Moscow on March 29 2010. One attack was by Marium Sharipova, a 28-year old school teacher from Balakhani, Dagestan, who detonated her bomb on a commuter train at Lubyanka station at 7.56am and killed 27 people in total. The other was by Dzhennet Abdullaeva, a 17-year old also from Dagestan, who activated her suicide belt at Park Kultury station 40 minutes later and killed 13 people. In addition to the fatalities, more than 100 people were injured in both attacks. Doku Umarov, leader of Dagestan's militant Islamist rebels, the Caucasus Emirate, claimed responsibility for these attacks soon after.<sup>1</sup> This was the first attack after the formally declared end to Russia's Counter Terrorist Operation in Chechnya in April 2009 (Harding 2010; BBC News 2010; Dzutsev 2010; Frost 2010). Finally, there was an unnamed female suicide bomber, who detonated her bomb outside the World Food Programme's distribution

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<sup>1</sup> There is, however, some discrepancy over whether it was the Caucasus Emirate who authorised the attacks: Shamsudin Batukaev, spokesman for the North Caucasus Emirate, for instance, claimed on March 31, that they were not involved; a different 'representative' on the same day suggested on TV channel First Caucasus that it was the Russian security forces instead; whilst footage of Doku Umarov's claim of responsibility was shown on the Kavkaz Center website, though some suggested it appeared dubious. (Dzutsev, 2010)

centre in Khar, Pakistan on December 26 2010. When stopped for routine security checks just outside the centre, she threw 2 hand grenades into a crowd of 300 people queuing for aid before activating her suicide belt.<sup>2</sup> She killed between 43 and 45 people, and wounded 80 to 102 others. She was the first confirmed female bomber claimed by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (Dawn 2010a, 2010b; Guardian 2010; Jerusalem Post 2010).<sup>3</sup>

(b) Prevalent portrayals

For reasons discussed elsewhere (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007), female bombers are often cast as victims, of either of an oppressive enemy, a ruthless terrorist regime, or an ‘uncivilised’ culture (Marway 2011).<sup>4</sup> Here, I take these explanations for the supposed victimhood of these women and explain how they misrepresent their agency.

There are details in numerous reports that intimate that it is the actions of ‘the enemy’ that are the explanation or catalyst for the women’s acts. For instance: that Degauque’s “husband [...was] shot dead in Iraq by US troops” (BBC 2005) whilst preparing for an attack himself, or that Abdullaeva’s “husband [...] a leading militant in the Russian region of Dagestan [...] was killed in a shoot-out with police on New Year's Eve” (Shuster 2010). Here the actions of opposing enemy forces (the US or Russia) caused the deaths of the women’s loved ones and, in turn, the women’s acts. Likewise, as Azam Tariq, spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban, claimed of women like the unnamed bomber, that she was moved to combat hostile “anti-Taliban forces”

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<sup>2</sup> Other reports claim she threw her grenades at police and military personnel

<sup>3</sup> There were at least two other cases of suspected female bombers in Pakistan before this, but these were not confirmed or claimed by the Pakistani Taliban. The group claimed this attack, but the female nature was not commented on explicitly. An attack on 26 June 2011 involving a husband and wife team in Kolachi, Pakistan was claimed by them and the sex of the bombers were also highlighted, with Pakistani Taliban spokesman, Ahsanullah Ahsan, claiming that the use of a woman “shows how much we hate Pakistani security institutions” (Ahsan in Mahsud, 2011)

<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere I have discussed different women and these – as well as other – sorts of explanations for their limited agency (Marway 2011).

(in Khan 2010), or, as in the Iraq case, that enemy groups bear the responsibility for deaths of those “killed or detained by US forces” (Haynes 2008) including partners of the female bombers. Those against the Taliban, or the US are blameworthy. Differently, the proposition is that, in Dagestan, internal security forces fail to protect the people and instead allow “corruption and lawlessness” (Harding 2010, 32) and so themselves become the enemy. Together, these responses suggest a reaction to occupying forces or to those in power.

In other reports, the women are thought to have become bombers because of actions of ‘their side’. For example, it was reported that: a Pakistani girl was “kidnapped, strapped with explosives and sent to blow [herself] up”<sup>5</sup> (Doherty 2011) by the Taliban who are ostensibly fighting against an occupying force for the Afghan people. In other organisations, it is suggested that a common tactic is for “a member of al-Qaeda to marry a woman and then dishonour her in some way, such as letting someone else rape her” (Haynes 2008) so she is shamed into “end[ing] her life” as a bomber (Shown in *ibid*). Other reports suggest that the women became accidentally embroiled in the world of terrorism through their manipulative partners. That there were “secret marriages between rebel commanders and Islamically minded women” (Harding 2010, 35) that led to them becoming radicalised, as was suggested with Sharipova, or that she was “a lost soul led astray” (Smith, 2005, 1), as was the view with Degauque and her involvement with her second husband. These women are portrayed as being tricked into becoming bombers. Collectively, then, the idea here is that it is the callousness of insurgents themselves that explains the situation.

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<sup>5</sup> About a young girl reportedly kidnapped by the Pakistani Taliban to become a bomber (Doherty, 2011)

A final set of reports suggests these women are victims of ‘their societies’. The bomber is portrayed as a “wom[a]n in a position of permanent servitude”<sup>6</sup> (Dearing 2010, 1) and unlikely to be able to decide anything for herself in the case of the Taliban. Alternatively, she is deemed a misfit in her society. Degauque is “a runaway who dabbled in drugs” (BBC 2005) after her brother’s death and she was failed by support structures around her. Differently the Dagestani women are presented as “widows of insurgent leaders” (Dzutsev 2010) who, like the Chechen ‘black widows’, are presumed to have limited worth after the deaths of their husbands (Groskop 2004).<sup>7</sup> In these examples, the women are presented as subordinates or outcasts, and their societies drive them to their acts.

While not the only portrayals, the female bombers are presented as ‘victims’ – whether at the hands of enemy forces, ruthless insurgents or repressive cultures. As victims, however, there is an assumption that they do not have a choice in what they do, and this effectively denies them agency (Marway 2011). Either the women are non-choosers of violence and forced into the act (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 50-51; West 2004, 7) or considered to be acting for personal reasons alone (West 2004, 7; Skaine 2006), for instance. There is the sense that no real choices were made – because they are not actors but merely unwilling reactors to enemies, insurgents, or societies. As victims, the women’s agency is virtually non-existent.

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<sup>6</sup> About female bombers utilised by the Taliban in Afghanistan (Dearing, 2010)

<sup>7</sup> Viv Groskop’s piece is about the Chechen bombers and culture

Yet it is unclear that their agency is as stark as the binary of victim/non-victim suggests. This is for at least two connected reasons. First, male bombers are regarded as engaging in such practices for a variety of reasons ranging from personal to political (though in some cases their agency is denied too – Atran 2004) and it is not farfetched to suppose that female bombers would hold comparable reasons. I suggest that possible evidence of agency is swept aside too quickly. Second, and linked, the severe contexts in which these women are immersed seem to lead to the conclusion that they have no agency. To avoid this conclusion – which many theorists who wish to recognise agency may want to do – the instinctive reaction is to say they have agency regardless of the context. I suggest, however, that contexts cannot wholly eliminate agency and decision-making cannot wholly disregard context. Whether there is a choice or not, then, does not seem to be the right question or sole indicator of agency; rather it is more pertinent to ask about the *quality* of the decisions being made. The women's agency must be represented in light of broader contextual aspects (since decision-making cannot exist outside of these settings), and in terms of the mechanics of the decision-making (since women are capable deciders), without any of this being reduced to the duality of victim-or-not. In ignoring this combination of factors, I argue that these representations deny the bombers proper agency for their actions and that better ways in which to conceptualise their agency are required.

### **Autonomy**

Discussions about agency in various disciplines often parallel those of autonomy in philosophy (Madhok, Phillips, Wilson 2013). Whether someone is autonomous – or self-ruling – revolves around the issue of whether the individual does what she genuinely wants. Relational models of autonomy are those that endorse a social self and consider decision-making within social constraint (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000)

and it is these that I discuss here. In particular, I consider which types of autonomy – procedural or substantive – allow us to meet the aim of properly representing the bomber’s autonomy in two ways: first with regards to reflecting the situation, context or structures of the women’s decisions; and second for reflecting degrees of autonomy. Following those with more substantive leanings, I argue that, for my example of the female bombers, procedural views are less able to factor in social features that frame and infuse decision-making, whilst substantive accounts are better at capturing these. Further I contend that substantive rather than procedural theories are better at plotting the degree of autonomy that might be evident for these women. Thus, substantive theories are to be preferred over procedural ones for reflecting how the bombers choose and the extent of autonomy they might have.

As sometimes little is known about the bombers, when I apply theory to practice in this section of the chapter, I will propose possible interpretations of the women by using what we do know, or what we could imagine, about them. Though there could be other readings, I suggest these are at least plausible ways to understand them. Moreover, the specifics are less important for the task at hand, which is to illustrate how the general philosophical approaches work and the sorts of things they can illuminate. The particulars could be changed which would offer different details but the broad models and the kinds of things they reveal would remain the same.

#### (a) Decision-making

Relational models of autonomy all start with a relational agent – an agent that is socially embedded, formed within social relationships and shaped by a complex set of



intersecting determinants (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 4) – but can be separated into two camps about decision-making: either procedural or substantive.

The procedural approaches take the agent to be autonomous if she reflects in the right kinds of ways. Diana Meyers argues, “what makes the difference between autonomous and heteronomous decisions is the way in which people arrive at them – the procedures they follow or fail to follow” (1989, 52). Marilyn Friedman contends an agent “might still be choosing autonomously even if she chooses subservience to others for its own sake, so long as she made her choice in the right way” (2003, 19). Andrea Westlund favours a method that is “formal rather than substantive in nature [which] carries with it no specific value commitments” (2009, 28). Though there are different ways in which to assess autonomous decision-making (such as requirements of competence, integration or answerability respectively), the common theme is that such theories focus on procedures and do not stipulate substantive choices that qualify as autonomous.

Substantive theories, on the other hand, go beyond the decision-making process alone. In particular, such models appeal to the content of the desire and/or are pinned to external factors to some extent. A strong substantive account, for instance, could focus on the agent’s ability to identify and reason according to the correct standards and norms – or whether they track “the True and the Good” (Wolf 1990, 71). If the content of their desires fall short of this cognitive and normative benchmark then, despite passing the procedural test, they are not good candidates for being autonomous. Alternatively, a strong theory could advocate that certain external

conditions, or socio-relational properties, exist before an agent can exercise her autonomy (Oshana 1998). Though anything can be chosen in theory, the individual must be in a society that allows her to pursue her goals in social and psychological security, for instance (*ibid*, 94-5). Such conditions are relevant in allowing *de facto* rather than simply *de jure* autonomy, and in what is (or can be) actually chosen (*ibid*). There is some interrogation, then, of the substance of the decision and/or a consideration of the external factors in which the agent is immersed. In effect strong accounts filter out desires based on the wrong norms or those formed in autonomy-inhibiting circumstances (Stoljar 2000, 95), ruling them out as nonautonomous.

Weaker versions of substantivism advocate that if the agent possesses certain traits, the content of the desire itself is not automatically limited. This position is very much linked to the external, since holding various traits – such as self-worth, self-esteem or self-respect (Benson 1994; Meyers 2008; Hill 1991) – are deeply connected to social forces and relationships, and much more so than the ‘self’ in each of these attitudes implies. Paul Benson, for instance, proposes a normative-competence account (2008, 136). Here it is the agent’s view towards herself, as contingent on her relational experiences (such as whether others engender a sense of self-worth in her and whether she holds a position of self-worth too), which is key for autonomy (rather than following certain norms or particular conditions transpiring).<sup>8</sup> The content is still interrogated as an indicator of a stance towards herself and the external matters in that it is a strong enabler of such stances, but certain decisions can pass as autonomous

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<sup>8</sup> This is similar to Westlund’s (2009) later account of answerability and responsibility for the self, but Benson states his is a weak substantive notion of self-worth, whereas Westlund argues hers is a procedural account since the agent “may even manifest a lack of self-respect” (37) yet still be able to answer for herself.

despite their content. Whether strong or weak, these are substantive views of autonomy.

### Application

Having sketched the broad approaches, the question with which I am now concerned is how well do these theories track features relevant to the female suicide bomber's decision-making? I argue that substantive accounts fare better than procedural ones because they more effectively trace factors like context, relationships and structures in decision-making.

To start, there are some clear benefits to procedural theories if we are interested in representing the women as having autonomy. Since the desire itself is not something that is limited (in principle anything can be chosen) and authentic decision-making revolves around what one really wants (whatever that happens to be), it seems that procedural approaches are likely to increase the chances of attributing autonomy to the bombers. And this indeed is our goal.

Further, as procedural accounts embrace the fundamentally social (not atomistic or individualistic) self, the importance of the social for agent and autonomy is not discounted. Degauque, Sharipova and the unnamed bomber are acknowledged as social selves that could not be understood as standing apart from their present and historical relationships (with her brother and husbands in Degauque's case) and contexts (of conflict and poverty in the examples of Sharipova and the unnamed bomber). This is the agent as relational. In addition, procedural accounts identify that autonomy (the process of self-reflection) is itself socially immersed too, and that

social forces are not absent from decision-making. Degauque's decision is linked to her contexts such that the desire to bomb emerges from the conflict in Iraq amongst other factors. This is autonomy as relational.

But, after these understandings of relationality, proceduralism focuses not on Degauque, Sharipova or the unnamed bomber's desire to *bomb*, (content or conditions underpinning it) but on self-reflection, endorsement of desires, or autonomy skills (procedures). The unnamed bomber could be considered to have certain competencies of "*self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction*" (Meyers 1989, 20) for instance, that enable her to reflect on the decision to bomb and accept it as hers despite difficult circumstances. Or Sharipova might hold a disposition to answer for herself and so the preference to bomb could be regarded as hers, even if she is within a subordinating relationship (Westlund 2009). Differently, Degauque's lower-order desires and higher-order principles might show a discrepancy or lack of integration – perhaps owing to oppressive forces – which indicates the desire is not hers (Friedman 1986). All of these involve some investigation into whether the desire is the bomber's (via the reflective procedure) but bombing itself (the content) is not assessed, so it remains a viable autonomous choice.

However, two related points can be raised here. First, insofar as our aim of mapping relevant features in the bomber's decision-making, it is likely that the social – the difficult context, subordinating relationship or oppressive structures above – does play a significant role in what they do. The bombers act partly because of these things as opposed to in spite of them, and when the focus is to recognise relevant aspects of

how they decide, this should be part of the discussion. While relational procedural accounts can do some of this, substantive ones do it better. Second, allowing any desire to be autonomous without properly considering how the external affects the substance of decisions – which is the more procedural approach – limits our understanding of just how pervasive social factors, and critically just how relational agents, are in their decision-making. Substantive approaches, again, can recognise this better.

Taking these in turn, others have made a similar argument regarding the first issue about the social – notably in relation to contraception and abortion decisions (Stoljar 2000), gaslighting (Benson 1994), voluntary slaves (Oshana 2006) and desperate choices (Widdows 2013). In these discussions the thought was – roughly – that procedural views omitted a proper consideration of relationships or contexts and their impact on what is chosen. Here I wish to illustrate this using the bombers.

If we imagine Sharipova within a situation of political conflict (in Dagestan, between insurgents and the Russian authorities) and in an oppressive environment that limits what she is expected to become as a woman (imagine an expectation to be a carer or teacher, for instance), then it is not difficult to suggest that these do frame her decisions. It is less the case that she can opt to be a banker or a doctor, which she may do in a less oppressive setting, or to be a pacifist, which she may do in more stable conditions. Even though Sharipova may go against the grain and do things that are unexpected of her – like becoming a bomber – the broader aspects are significant to

what she selects, as various theorists have argued about persons in general.<sup>9</sup> Thinking about what is chosen and the context, relationships or structures in which it is chosen as a whole (a substantive view) is more likely to accurately reflect how decisions are made than sidelining the content altogether (a procedural view). Though it may seem that procedural accounts are a plausible understanding of how agents decide, and may seem to bestow women with agency whatever they choose, it is less helpful in tracking all the elements relevant to their decision-making once considered a little deeper.

The second and connected issue is the extensiveness of the social. While procedural theorists accept the social self, that social factors govern the autonomy process, and even that decisions emerge from social contexts (as noted above), they do not wish to extend the assessment of autonomy to the content of decisions which themselves are not immune to the social. I contend that to not recognise how the substance of those choices is profoundly affected by one's sociality – such that it requires some role in autonomy – is ultimately to downplay the relational self. To ignore the substance underestimates how far the social nature of self goes and so how much the content of decision-making is contingent on the external. The sort of self that is relational “all the way down” (Code 2000, 196) implies that the content of and reasons behind decisions themselves are likely to play a part in deciphering whether the desires are the agent's own. Without factoring this in, we might miss signs of oppression – that

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<sup>9</sup> A broad-range of theorists – not just autonomy theorists – have argued that the context and content is important for decision-making. There has been much discussion, for instance, about adaptive preferences and how one's preferences can change depending on what one can expect to get or to be in their circumstances (Nussbaum 2000). Others have criticised that – in relation to forced marriages – there is a failure to distinguish formal and substantive 'exit rights' (Okin 2002). Procedural theorists in the relational camp would certainly wish to acknowledge the importance of these contextual aspects, but substantive theorists want to go further and include this in the assessment of autonomy, as I will go on to show.

is, forms of interference that are due to subordinating social structures – that affect what is chosen.

The pull of proceduralism is that it preserves plural conceptions of the good. Yet to exclude the content of the decision and thereby a clear look at the interrelations between the content and (the potentially oppressive) external contexts, relationships or structures misrepresents how much the social is a part of agents and obscures factors affecting how agents decide and importantly what they decide. On these two grounds, procedural accounts track relevant features of decision-making less well than they might.

That brings us onto substantive theories. As with their procedural counterparts, these theories start from the relational self – a social self – and the acknowledgement that social factors contextualise autonomy. Unlike proceduralists, however, substantivists wish to include the content of or reasons behind those decisions as part of the assessment of autonomy, as this stays truer to the thoroughly social selves the bombers are (as has just been alluded to).

If we return to the bomber Sharipova, for instance, if it transpires that Sharipova has damaged self-worth as those around her do not expect much from her (a weak substantive focus – Benson 1994) and this causes her to *not-bomb* then the content is considered suspect and possibly not what she wants. Alternatively, if Sharipova has very few meaningful options (a strong substantive view – Oshana 1998) then the

content of her desire to *bomb* might be more problematic.<sup>10</sup> There is recognition, then, that some decisions may be more precarious given the context or relationships or structures – where oppressive settings lead to a reduced self-worth or an absence of meaningful options. Yet factoring in these features does capture how Sharipova decides and affects what she chooses; damaged self-worth derived in part from oppressive structures impacts whether autonomy-inhibiting decisions are made. In other words, what is decided and why, in conjunction with the contexts, relationships and structures in which it occurs, plays a role in reflecting the overall character of decision-making.

While taking all this into account may result in not labelling people autonomous as swiftly as procedural views might allow, which at first glance seems counterproductive to our goal of recognising the bomber's agency, the social and the content of decisions is so significant for how persons decide in substantive models that it must be captured in conceptions of autonomy. This is not to imply that these externalities make the bombers nonautonomous. Indeed clarifying this issue is the aim of the next section of the chapter.

#### (b) Amounts of autonomy

All relational theories wish to move away from conceptualising autonomy as solely an either/or capacity – that either one has it or does not – and toward the idea of a

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<sup>10</sup> Oshana's four sufficiency conditions for autonomy are: (1) critical reflection (to determine authenticity in a similar way to most 'internalists', such as Gerald Dworkin or John Christman); (2) procedural independence (where this requires non-coercion or non-manipulation, but also demands certain substantive standards to actually meet the formality stipulation); (3) access to a range of relevant options (the condition is not met by having an endless supply of non-autonomous options or where the options only satisfy brute desires); (4) social-relational properties (the individual must be in a society that allows her to pursue her goals in social and psychological security) (1998, 94-5).



spectrum of autonomy – that one can be more or less autonomous. Here I explore how well the theories might recognise the extent of autonomy in these women’s decisions.

In procedural accounts persons must pass a threshold after which they attain degrees of autonomy. On one theory, subservient decisions are less autonomous than non-subservient ones but they are autonomous nonetheless, for example (Friedman 2003). An another theory, a degree-based approach could be pinned to how well someone exercises autonomy competency (skills of self-discovery, self-definition and self-direction) (Meyers 1989). Here minimal, medial and full autonomy is distinguished and it is likely that full self-governance is rare, medial achievable by many, and minimal by most (*ibid*).<sup>11</sup> These views attempt to move away from autonomy being there or not (the focus on competence or capacity alone) to considering the extent to which autonomy is exerted (the focus on exercise).

Though not all explicitly state this, substantive positions also lean towards a degree-based approach. Stronger accounts tend to emphasise that social norms are significant and can limit the amount of autonomy attainable because they come to impress false ideals on the agent. Wolf’s case of JoJo – the dictator who believes that ruling well is

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<sup>11</sup> Meyers’ characterisation of the levels of autonomy are: “I shall say someone is *minimally autonomous* when this person possesses at least some disposition to consult his or her self and at least some ability to act on his or her own beliefs, desires, and so forth, but when this person lacks some of the other skills from the repertory of autonomy skills, when the autonomy skills the person possesses are poorly developed and poorly coordinated, and when this person possesses few independent competencies that could promote the exercise of available autonomy skills. I shall say that someone is *fully autonomous* when this person possesses a complete repertory of well developed and well coordinated autonomy skills coupled with many and varied independent competencies. *Medially autonomous* people range along a spectrum between these two poles” (Meyers, 1989, 170). Meyers’s framework relates to her notions of “episodic”, “programmatically” and “narrowly programmatic” autonomy (1989, 48). She illustrates that in oppressive situations (such as feminine socialisation) high degrees of episodic autonomy can be achieved (doing what one most wants in a particular situation), and narrowly programmatic autonomy can be achieved (decisions on a life partner for instance), but programmatic autonomy (whether to marry at all or whether to be a mother) are compromised (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000).

to rule cruelly (1990) – is an instance where the agent is less (though arguably, as I shall discuss, there is an implication that they are un-) able to be autonomous. Autonomy is limited when one endorses a desire that involves incorrect (different to ‘the True and the Good’) values and fails to critically challenge them. The content of what is chosen, then, indicates the sorts of values held and so the amount of autonomy that might exist.

Weaker substantive accounts focus on the extent to which oppressive norms affect one’s self-worth or self-esteem. Negative external circumstances – like those of the gaslighted woman, whose husband manipulates her to doubt her sanity so he can cheat her out of money – can lead to a diminished self-worth and autonomy (Benson 1994). The situation erodes her self-worth to the extent that her competence to question her desires and values (say to hand over her inheritance to her husband) are reduced, even if she appears to readily endorse them (*ibid*). The degree of autonomy she enjoys is less than if she had a strong self-worth owing to a more conducive social setting. The content here is useful as a barometer of the extent of self-worth – and so the degree of autonomy that – the agent has.

### Application

Having set out that relational accounts favour a degree-based notion of autonomy, the question now is how useful are the different interpretations for recognising how much autonomy the female bombers may have. I argue that when we want to make a judgment on the extent of autonomy, it is better to include several variables and build up a detailed picture of the women’s situations and decisions. Extending the earlier discussion, I propose that substantive theories (that factor in the content as well as

broader contexts while paying homage to the relational nature of the agent) are more apt at this task than procedural ones.

When applying the procedural account, a minimal threshold (competence) and then degree (exercise) of autonomy can be considered. If Degauque is someone who, for instance, has the brute ability for self-reflection, then the extent to which she exercises her self-discovery, self-definition and self-direction skills is key in judging how much autonomy she has in her decision to bomb (Meyers 1989). One formulation is that if we imagine Degauque to resist, question and then agree with her former husband's wish to join al-Qaeda, then she exercises her self-direction skill a great deal more than if she just 'goes along' with it (*ibid*, 83). This attributes some agency to Degauque even if we suppose she is in difficult circumstances.

While a useful conception of degrees, the worry with procedural theories is that – following the section above – by de-emphasising substantive elements (such as content or attitudes towards the self) they are less able to account for just how social agents' choices and decision-making are, and further just how social persons are. Without factoring in more substantive features, there are fewer tools for determining how much autonomy the bombers have. Since the focus for analysis in procedural accounts is the process of decision-making and not the substance of the decision itself, the full picture of the extent of autonomy is less easily mapped and perhaps even obscured in content-neutral theories. Moreover, by limiting what is assessed as part of autonomy, there is less of an appreciation of how social agents, including their autonomous abilities, are.

To substantiate some of this, let us take four instances of Sharipova (none of which involve direct interference with the decision-making process) where she is part of a society that:

- (1) does not advocate bombing and she decides to bomb
- (2) does not advocate bombing and she decides not to bomb
- (3) does advocate bombing and she decides to bomb; and
- (4) does advocate bombing and she decides not to bomb.

This combination of broader societal factors, the decision-making, and the content of the decision might each tell us something slightly different about Sharipova's autonomy. Instances (1) and (3) involve the content of bombing, while (2) and (4) involve the content of not-bombing. Instances (3) and (4) involve a society that encourages bombing, whereas (1) and (2) a society that discourages it. Without going into each combination and prescribing what is most autonomous (this is not my focus), I propose that it is when the content, context, relationships and structures, and decision-making from the relational self, are considered together that a better understanding of the degree of Sharipova's autonomy is facilitated. In other words, by drawing on these different elements, substantive views offer an additional (and so potentially richer) and more accurate (owing to properly recognising the social self as well as more variables in autonomy), way in which to measure degrees of autonomy than procedural theories.

How well do *strong* substantive theories fare? In the example of Sharipova, it might be the case that, following a Wolfian account, there has been an accurate tracking of ‘the True and the Good’. We can imagine that Sharipova recognises the complexities of the conflict in Dagestan, her role as a teacher and daughter, and what is expected of her. In this scenario, she is able to cognitively see the world as it is. Further, she might have the relevant kind of moral understanding that allows her to avoid erroneous judgements. She is able to decipher normative cues in the appropriate kinds of ways. Here, on top of minimal capacities and the internal procedures of decision-making, how well Sharipova aligns herself to cognitive and normative factors about the world (as seen by what she endorses) is an additional resource that helps us to recognise the amount of her autonomy.

A problem here might be that a strong view does not enable some desires to be recorded as autonomous to *some* extent because they are the *wrong* sorts. As Benson has argued, strong theories can be charged with being about right-rule rather than self-rule (2008). They can be criticised for letting nothing (or not very much) pass as autonomous because agents have to pick the right thing. Where we are concerned to identify subtleties in autonomy rather than a crude autonomous-or-not view, as is our purpose, this is worrying. There might be a reply here: the focus of strong accounts is less about choosing rightly than about there being more appropriate choices (itself a matter of degree). As Wolf (1990) has argued, the normative component of her view does not require knowing what *the* good is but recognising there are better or worse ways to be.<sup>12</sup> In a parallel way, ideas about false norms could identify not *the* true

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<sup>12</sup> Responsibility on Wolf’s account depends on the freedom to appreciate the True and the Good; to discern cognitive beliefs and moral values about the world. Whilst she accepts this commits us to objectivity (it

norm but better or worse norms for agents. In this regard, what is captured on the spectrum with nuance is how far agents decide according to (or how far the content of their decisions are aligned to) better or worse norms. This might not satisfy some for whom it is still taking autonomy into the realm of right-rule, but this may be a way out of the worry that strong theories do not allow for a spectrum.

How apt are *weak* substantive theories for measuring degrees of the female bombers' autonomy? On a self-worth account, the extent of autonomy can be indicated through responsibility for self (Benson 2000). We could imagine that Sharipova lives in a context where expectations to answer for herself were in place (she is in a position of authority as a school teacher and has a good deal of self-worth from it, both toward herself and from others). Alternatively, we can suppose that Degagague who was encouraged to be answerable when growing up might have a reduced self-worth because of her subsequent experiences (from personal grief or similar) that leave her with little faith in herself. Though both women might be competent and self-reflective and may formally endorse bombing, on this picture, Degagague has less self-worth to answer appropriately, which affects her reflection. These distinctions allow us to decipher the degree of autonomy she exercises. It also evades the problem of right-rule since the content is a useful resource for more fully gauging attitudes towards the self and the quality of reflection this enables and is not about picking the right thing.

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"implies the existence of nonarbitrary standards of correctness" – 1990, 124) she denies that this is as onerous as we might initially think, claiming there is no privileged position to determine freedom, no guarantee that we can or will see things aright, but equally no reason to doubt that the "powers [to do so, including those of logic, but also imagination and perception] are at least partly open to us." (2008, 273) Thus, her position is not that there needs to be an optimal and complete set of values or that they be knowable from a culture-independent view, but that "the agent be capable of forming better values rather than worse ones, good value judgements rather than bad ones, just insofar as there *are* better and worse choices and judgments to be made." And she goes on to say that "According to the Reason View, the responsible agent must be in a position that allows the reasons she has for a choice to be governed by the reasons there are. But if the reasons there are fail to determine a uniquely right or best choice, the agent is no less responsible [or, to extend it for purposes of this chapter, autonomous] an agent for that." (1990, 125)

One could counter at least one of two things here. First that a spectrum is not the point of autonomy at all; that what matters *is* whether Degagaque, Sharipova, or the unnamed bomber meet the minimum requirement of competence and that they satisfy a theory-dependent form of reflection. In other words, that we know whether they are autonomous *or* not. Second, that procedural views could include all the additional elements of the context or relationships or structures after this judgement about being autonomous or not is made. Rather than conflate being autonomous and degrees of autonomy, they can be distinguished. In both regards procedural theories would be best since – though these would not deny the importance of a spectrum – autonomy and degrees of autonomy are more easily separable and degrees can be deduced without reference to substantive content or attitudes. However, if the concern is genuinely to represent the autonomy of the women, as it is for this chapter and book (and for relational theories in general), then the more relevant question does concern degrees and to decipher degrees satisfactorily. In order to do this, recognising the depths of one’s sociality and how this extends to content and attitudes is important for framing how autonomous one is. Likewise, expanding what is considered as part of the assessment of autonomy to include content and attitudes is key. Limiting these components would be too austere while broadening them would be better for a more comprehensive picture of the amount of autonomy overall. As has been argued, substantive theories recognise this sociality and come equipped to examine substantive factors that may be more useful for measuring and thus representing nuances in the bombers’ autonomy than procedural theories that do not go as far on either of these counts. Further, a strength of the weaker over the stronger substantive view (if my suggested reply above is not accepted) is that it evades some of the

worries about right-rule (Benson 2008) and so opens up what might be considered partly autonomous. This is likely to be more useful for the bombers since it treads the difficult ground of recognising the way in which individuals are thoroughly social (so how the external permeates decision-making) while also leaving room for plurality of decisions (so that bombing might be decided upon by them and some autonomy attributable).

Thus, the weak substantive view is well suited to representing the extent of the bombers' autonomy while recognising the depths of their sociality. It can discern a more thorough and accurate picture of the degree of autonomy that exists for the female suicide bombers than procedural views. In this regard, substantive theories should be preferred over procedural ones when accounting for the autonomy of the bombers and to avoid the victim-agent binary.

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