
Dianomy: Understanding Religious Women's Moral Agency as Creative Conformity

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This essay seeks to contribute to work on moral agency of religious women through the creative naming of a dynamic that is emerging in recent scholarship. Drawing on fieldwork in Iran in 2004, I argue that prominent models of agency based on autonomy, heteronomy, and theonomy are unable take into account both religious influence on and individual creativity of women's actions. I propose the neologism, "dianomy," meaning dual-sources of the moral law, to account for moral agency that relies neither exclusively upon the self as a source of moral authority nor exclusively upon religious traditions. Dianomy also attempts to comprehend creative ruptures in obedience to tradition, even when these innovations are unintentional. Such a concept is particularly important in order to correct past tendencies to ignore or even negate feminist politics that do not resist or strategically reform religious norms. With dianomy, tactical moves, actions that are not "freely chosen," and even happy accidents can be studied as productive within traditional religious communities. I call these types of actions, which confound the actions theorized by autonomy, heteronomy, and theonomy, "creative conformity."

AN ANECDOTE SETS THE stage for this essay by illustrating the type of disruptions that led to my own rethinking on the subject of

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women's moral agency. It took place during field work conducted with prominent Iranians concerning Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's impact on recent feminist politics in Iran:

12 August 2004. Tehran, Iran.

Today I am interviewing Shahla Habibi, special advisor on women's affairs to former Iranian President Hashimi Rafsanjani. The heat, my tardiness, and the difficulty in locating this office have only contributed to a general level of anxiety with which I started the day. Habibi is a prominent post-Revolution figure in national politics. In 1995 President Rafsanjani appointed her as Iran's first Presidential Advisor on Women's Affairs, a position that would later become part of the official cabinet.¹ She led the Iranian delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and currently runs a non-governmental organization in Tehran. These impressive credentials were in the back of my head when I got dressed earlier in the morning. I am wearing my most conservative Islamic dress in an attempt to increase my status in Habibi's eyes: a baggy, knee-length, black overcoat, or *manteau*, long loose pants, black socks with my sandals and a black head scarf, tied under my chin.

I am glad for the extra effort in my dress when Habibi greets me at her door in full *chador*, the traditional form of Iranian dress that became a symbol of the Islamic Revolution. Once in the private space of her office, she invites me to remove my headscarf. Feeling that this is some sort of test of my cultural respect, I retie my scarf even more tightly despite the heat, attempting to prove I respect the Islamic traditions of my host country.

I begin my interview carefully, treading lightly as I try to determine the limits of what Habibi is comfortable discussing with an U.S. researcher. My questions start out vague and open ended: What do you think are the most important women's rights issues in Iran today? What are the challenges for women in the Islamic Republic? What do you hope for the future of women? And I take my lead from her responses, which steer us towards a discussion about Khomeini's legacy for women's political participation in the Islamic Republic. Habibi is a large woman with a booming voice, and she quickly becomes animated in our discussion of the Khomeini, who she calls

¹This position was later held by Zahra Shojaei under President Khatami and by Nasrin Soltankhah during President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's administration. Space allowing, more could be said about the larger political and religious context for Habibi's life, including the role of moral guidance in the Tvelever Shii tradiiton, as well as the particular role Islam has played in contemporary Iranian history. This context is indeed crucial for understanding the specific arguments Habibi makes about women, although my hope is that the broader theoretical considerations she raises can be understood by scholars without a background in Islam or Iran.

“my Imam.” Into her mini-lectures about Khomeini’s life and teaching, Habibi weaves her own beliefs about women’s primary duties as mothers and wives, as well as snipes about how western women can be too ambitious and cold-hearted towards their families. We shift to discussing her participation in the UN Beijing conference in 1995. At one point she argues for support of CEDAW² in Shariah law and the possibility of a female president in Iran before one in the United States. When I admit this is quite plausible, she is pleased and erupts into a quiet but deep chuckle.

In my next question I refer to her as an Islamic feminist. This is a mistake. The phrase catches Habibi’s attention. She slams her hands down on her desk cutting me off mid-sentence and declaims in an annoyed tone: “I am not a feminist. Do not call me a feminist. I do not believe in your feminism.”³ I stutter a little and apologize, knowing that despite my familiarity with Khomeini’s writings and my effort to wear “good *hijab*,” I have at best distanced myself from Habibi, and at worst offended her. Our interview is temporarily halted for the next half an hour as she returns to this label again and again, defining herself against it, bringing up western women such as Simone de Beauvoir and Madeline Albright, who in Habibi’s opinion, misunderstand women’s proper roles and the significance of religious women’s actions.

Later that day I cannot shrug off Habibi’s declaration that she does not believe in “my feminism.” I am extremely uneasy; had I offended her on a personal level? I am also uncomfortable, because her rejection of my label was an implicit questioning of my right to interpret her argument and actions. Her words echoed my own nagging doubts about my scholarship. My attempt at good dress was not enough to understand a woman with such different understandings of womanhood.

This brief anecdote discloses the conceptual ignorance, and perhaps arrogance, that characterized my initial approach to religious women’s moral agency. My hope is that my (mis)labeling of Habibi as a feminist, and her reaction to it, will help orient the reader in the theoretical discussion that follows by demonstrating a type of practical challenge posed to theories of agency in the field.

My field work in Iran is part of a larger comparative study of the politics of Catholic and Shia women in the United States and Iran,

²Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, G.A. Res. 34/180, U.N. Doc. A/Res/34/180 (1980).

³“Man fiminist nistam. Man rā bih ‘unvān-i fiminist nisāb nakunid. I’tiqād bih fiminizm nadāram.”

respectively; initially I thought something like “women’s empowerment”⁴ would be the focus of my cross-cultural research on women’s moral lives. Using this approach, I had planned to focus on religious women’s strategies for culling resources from clerical teachings. But as my conversation with Mrs. Habibi conveys, what is considered to be “woman’s empowerment” is itself highly debatable among women. The context within which I labeled Habibi a feminist, for example, signaled that I was filtering her arguments through a preconceived secular-liberal framework about what women are or what they want. In her opinion, this methodology limited my ability to see a full range of women’s actions and the effects of these actions. This meant that in essence I was learning from Mrs. Habibi only what I already knew. I had slid into a sort of academic ventriloquism, “throwing my voice” to the women I study. With her accusation (“your feminism”) Habibi was able to show me how I had become the subject of my own scholarship.

In this article, I use my interaction with Habibi as a springboard to discuss theories of moral agency and the assumptions they entail about women. Toward this end, I explore three types of approaches to religious women’s agency—based, respectively, on autonomous, heteronomous, and theonomous understandings of the moral life. I intend to discuss these as ideal types, useful in highlighting different sorts of scholarly feminist assumptions. They are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily subscribed to in their ideal form by any scholar. Nevertheless, I provide brief sketches of the three theories of the moral life in order to demonstrate how each might affect scholarship on the moral lives of women.

In the end, all three theories proved inadequate for my purposes. “Autonomy” emphasizes the importance of the individual in the moral life and sees a woman as the source of her freedom and innovation. However, a study of religious women that assumes an autonomous model of the moral life tends to value only women’s dissent from religious traditions (i.e., the “bad girls” of religion), rejecting that actions which look like obedience are done freely or are creative.⁵

⁴Talal Asad has pointed out that empowerment was originally a legal term (meaning giving power to someone, or having the power to act), which has come to be understood by some liberal theorists as “a metaphysical quality defining human subjectivity, its objective as well as precondition” (35).

⁵I do not mean to imply that the autonomous model of moral agency values only resistance to religious norms. In fact, any resistance would be seen as a demonstration of a women’s free will by this model (including actions that resist wider secular cultural norms). However, for the purposes of this paper, I narrow my analysis to how women’s actions are described in relation to gender norms expressed by male religious leaders.

“Heteronomy,” as I define it for the purposes of this essay,⁶ draws on post-structuralism theories in order to place women within a system of external forces and emphasizes the role of habit formation for the moral life. Below I consider the work of a representative scholar, Saba Mahmood, whose understanding of moral agency tends to obscure free subjects and focuses scholarly inquiry on how women enact religious traditions (i.e., the “good girls” of religion), neglecting how this enactment itself can be ambiguous or innovative. Finally, I consider “theonomy” as a possible middle ground between autonomy and heteronomy. At first blush, theonomy seems to solve many of the shortcomings of the other two theories by combining their strengths under a broader conception of theism. However, for my specific research theonomy proved deficient because of its focus on God versus the concrete situation of women in religious communities, its neglect of the importance of interaction between individuals (such as clerics and laity), and its inability to maintain the tension between autonomy and heteronomy.

The neologism I introduce to help understand the moral discourse of women in religious traditions is “dianomy,” a two-fold understanding of the moral life. Dianomy recognizes that both an individual and her community are important; that agency is shaped within specific conditions and yet can also point beyond them, and that there is a possibility of creative compliance that is not necessarily intentional resistance. In this way, I integrate the core ideas of autonomy (free will) and heteronomy (local habituation) as crucial for understanding the moral life. But dianomy also recognizes the nonreducibility of autonomy and heteronomy. Women’s actions within this model of moral agency are negotiations of the tension between autonomy and heteronomy through simultaneous citation and shift of an external law in ethical performances that are responsive, partial, and creative.

Throughout this article, I have in mind a specific form of women’s actions and will draw explanatory examples from it: rhetoric understood as persuasive argumentation. Elsewhere I have argued that a focus on moral discourse as rhetoric is helpful to the study of religious ethics because it can account for the dynamic interplay between leader and laity (Bucar 2007, 2008). For this same reason, rhetoric is one way to study religious women’s agency: even in traditions where the clerical class is limited to men, women are an audience for and respondents to clerical rhetoric about the gendered moral life. My interest in rhetoric

⁶Aspects of dianomy can be found in Kant’s understanding of heteronomy, for example, in the imperfection of habituation. My thanks to an anonymous reader at the *JAAR* for this insight.

aside, the following discussion of women's agency could be helpful to projects focused on other performances such as bodily practices that are not primarily or explicitly justified through discourse.

THREE CONVENTIONAL APPROACHES TO MORAL AGENCY

Autonomy: Universal Reason, Equality, and Dissent

Autonomy, or "self-law," recognizes the self as the final moral authority. Autonomous theories of ethics take a variety of forms, but Immanuel Kant provides the philosophical underpinning for many of them with his emphasis on radical equality between agents (1964 [1948]: 102–103), each of whom is capable of deciding what is good or right through their capacity to reason (1956: pt. 2). In ethical theories based on autonomy, individuals are treated as the proper ends of a moral life and should never be instrumentalized by others (1964 [1948]: 102ff).

For a long time, autonomy was the grounding theory of much feminist work in the academy. One prominent example is the work of philosopher Susan Moller Okin (1989, 1999). In Okin's particular view of women's agency women are truly free only when they work against the traditions that constrain them. Behind Okin's statements like women "might be better off if the culture into which they were born were . . . to become extinct" (1999: 22) is the assumption that religion (which she equates with culture) can impede agency, that only in our "natural state" (for Okin this seems to be a liberal democratic republic) are we autonomous, freely choosing, and acting agents.

There are advantages to feminist ethics based on autonomy. First, autonomy gives us a way to focus on individual women in a very direct way, instead of communities or larger groups within which the possibilities for individual members to flourish may conflict. Second, autonomy recognizes the equality of men and women based on our shared capacity to reason about the moral life. Finally, autonomy offers a way to understand a critical moment in women's praxis. For autonomous ethical theories, dissent under conditions of subordination is often portrayed as the ultimate expression of agency.

However, if autonomy has advantages for feminist work, it also presents a number of challenges for the study of religious women's actions. Autonomy claims that the source of moral law is the self, and that agents should be radically independent in the pursuit of a moral life. This neglects the fact that communities can have an enormous impact on shaping understandings and enactments of real moral freedoms.

A second problem with autonomy is that it assumes a universal form of rationality, which may not be empirically verifiable. In the hands of political commentator Katha Pollitt, this assumption has implications for religious practitioners that are even more insidious: they are themselves irrational.

If we look at who actually becomes a Christian fundamentalist, we will find not so many graduates of elite universities, well equipped to make their way in the Information Age, [as] lots of anxious workers and small business people, as well as a good many ex-alcoholics and ex-addicts and other casualties of contemporary life, who are attracted to the practical support system, emotional fellowship, and structured ideology provide by their churches. (2002: xiii)

Pollitt, in not so subtle terms, accuses “fundamentalists” of being ignorant, or at least of not being able to think for themselves, simply because they do not think the way she does. She implies that “graduates of elite universities” have a sort of raised consciousness that allows them the freedom to make rational decisions about all aspects of their life, without the “structured ideology” of religion. The subtext is that we, understood as nonreligious folk, are intellectually superior, more rationally evolved. Religion and religious folk are dismissed as irrational.

Finally, autonomy is problematic in its tendency to focus exclusively on women’s resistance to religion. Lila Abu-Lughod, an anthropologist who studies Bedouin women in Egypt, has discussed this last problem in her influential article, “The Romance of Resistance”:

The problem has been that those of us who have sensed that there is something admirable about resistance have tended to look to it for hopeful confirmation of the failure—or partial failure—of systems of oppression. Yet it seems to me that we respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity of heroism of the resisters but by letting their practices teach us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power. (1990: 53)

Assuming resistance is the only form of empowerment leads to two major analytical mistakes. First, we risk reading as resistance even those actions that are not intentionally resisting at all, thereby assigning intentions to women’s actions that are not their own. Second, we risk judging any action that looks like obedience as not “truly free.”

Relating these shortcomings to my interaction with Habibi is illuminating. A scholar assuming an autonomous model of the moral life would most likely focus on Habibi’s arguments that seem to resist her

local conditions. This was essentially what caused my faux pas with her. I only referred to Habibi as a feminist after the arguments she made supporting CEDAW, a UN treaty that couches women's freedom in legal equality. This meant that I had in mind a very specific conception of what freedom is: resistance to Islamic norms related to gender complementarity. I was hearing only her arguments that looked like the expression of an autonomous moral agent. I had initially dismissed anything she said that seemed to replicate the Shii party line about the natural traits of women or their primary roles as mothers and wives. But through her hand slamming, Habibi demonstrated that obedience, or enactment of a norm, is not irrelevant to women's freedom. It is sometimes the way in which freedom is expressed. Therefore, autonomy could not be the methodological basis of my study.

Heteronomy: Situated Rationality, Habituation, and Obedience

Heteronomy, or "other-law," recognizes the individual as subject to an external moral law. Ethical work based on heteronomous conceptions of moral agency stress the individual as part of a larger discursive structure (social, political, philosophical, religious, among others). The moral life is dependent on this structure, and to be successful in the moral life, the agent conforms to ethical knowledge that is not of her own making. In this way, heteronomous ethics assumes a condition of preexisting hierarchy, which is not only morally valid, but also morally necessary.

A contemporary theory of heteronomous ethics is found in the work of Foucault, who rejects the universal agent of autonomy, insisting instead that agency develops out of concrete structures of discourse. Foucault's concern is with showing "how the subject constituted itself, in one specific form or another, as a mad or a healthy subject, as a delinquent or nondelinquent subject through certain practices that were also games of truth, practices of power" (1994: 290). Unfortunately Foucault's writings are sometimes contradictory on the topic of agency.⁷ Since Muslim women's agency first sparked my interest in heteronomy, I consider here how Saba Mahmood, a cultural anthropologist, has developed a widely read theory of what she calls

⁷Charles Taylor provides one of the clearest explanations of how "Foucault disconcerts" the reader (152). He argues that our confusion is caused in part by the impression that Foucault offers a critique of "a good unrealized or repressed in history" (152) while at the same time rejecting the idea that there is "some good we can affirm" (1984: 152). Mark Bevir argues that there are "two Foucaults" on agency and freedom. The "excited Foucault" argues that agency does not exist. The "composed Foucault" argues that autonomous agency is impossible, but leaves open the possibility of agents as creative beings (1999: 65–69, 79–81).

“the feminist subject” based on her field work on the Egyptian women’s piety movement.

Mahmood states that a theory of agency must “emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity” (2004: 15) and, therefore, she would most likely object to my use of her understanding of agency to represent an ideal type. Her potential objections aside, I maintain that this exercise is helpful because her account of agency has been extremely popular. While she might not expect her understanding of agency to be applied in all cases, she would advocate for other scholarship based on similar local heteronomous understandings of the moral life. Therefore, I want to consider in more detail some of the drawbacks that her conceptualization of agency presents to the study of religious women.

In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Mahmood draws elegant connections between anthropology and the embodied nature of virtue. The problem with scholarship based on autonomy, she argues, is that “agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles” (2004: 8). This both romanticizes resistance and neglects a wide range of Muslim women’s actions that are not resistance but are nonetheless genuine expressions of their uncoerced agency. She demonstrates how the Egyptian women she works with confound the assumptions of autonomy underlying much feminist scholarship by rejecting, among other goals, gender equality. In contrast, Mahmood suggests that we consider agency “in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (2004: 15).

Drawing on Aristotle and Foucault, Mahmood argues that the best way to think about agency is in terms of culturally and historically specific skills to perform certain actions. She provides a helpful metaphor for her conceptualization of agency:

We might consider the example of a virtuoso pianist who submits herself to the often-painful regime of disciplinary practice . . . 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. (2004: 29)

This description is very reminiscent of Aristotle, to whom Mahmood signals she is indebted for her understanding of habituation (2004: 25–26).

She uses habituation to argue that religions, as discursive traditions (Asad 1986: 16), create the possibilities for action through the practice of embodied performances that relate actions to rules or sensibilities. For ethics this means that how “norms are lived and inhabited, inspired to, reached for, and consummated” (Mahmood 2004: 23) even if they reconstitute the religious tradition, are an expression of real agency and therefore of concern when studying the moral lives of women.

This heteronomous view of agency also has a number of advantages for the scholarship of religious women. First, it allows us to move away from the idea of a subject that must extract herself from her religion in order to be truly free. In terms of moral discourse, 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. In the case of Habibi, a heteronomous understanding of agency could have stopped me from automatically dismissing those parts of her moral discourse that essentialized women's roles in the family and instead would have allowed me to consider them as part of her authentically held vision of womanhood.

Second, heteronomy can support a more serious consideration of the role of traditions, including religious ones, as part of a web of forces surrounding a woman. In terms of moral discourse, this means even women's arguments and actions that enact and reinforce gendered distinctions of a tradition are expressions of women's agency. This allows a consideration of Habibi's actions beyond those that resist religious norms.

Third, in contrast to Kant's theory of universal rationality, Mahmood's heteronomous ethical project sees rationality as situated. This understanding of rationality is enormously important in helping us to consider specific rhetorics within religious communities, the logics each rhetorical performance entails, and the local assumptions that rhetoric attempts to access in order to persuade. In other words, to understand the productive power of Habibi's words, they must be analyzed against a particular backdrop. Finally, there is the very helpful concept of habituation (as a practice of embodied performance that relates actions to rules) that Mahmood adds to our toolbox for understanding agency. In this way, even Habibi's skill of rhetorical performance, displayed in our interaction, is part of the moral life.

Consequently, if Mahmood's version of heteronomy solves some of autonomy's problems for theorizing women's moral discourse, it introduces a number of its own. In the section that follows I use her two major intellectual influences, Aristotle and Foucault, to identify ethical blind spots in her theory of women's agency related to the moral ambiguity of skills and the role of critique in the moral life.

The first problem I want to raise is related to Mahmood's reliance on Aristotle to rehabilitate the cultivation of embodied skills as crucial to the moral life. Aristotle distinguishes between *techne* (craft knowledge) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) (1999: 1140a1–1140b30), where the former seems closest to what Mahmood describes as skills or “registers of corporeality” (2004: 188). But if we rely on Aristotle for this distinction, we should also acknowledge that Aristotle under-values the importance of *techne* compared with *phronesis* for the moral life because of the moral ambiguity of embodied skills.⁸ For example, persuasive discourse is not always moral; it is sometimes nonmoral, or even immoral. The problem is not only what hypocrites can do with the system, but also how even properly cultivated skills can be tied to ends that might appear contradictory to some audience members (Stalnaker 2009).

Mahmood does not discuss the implications of this moral ambiguity, despite her reliance on *techne* for her account of agency. Take her use of the metaphor of the virtuoso pianist to describe women's agency. The better trained we are to produce a beautiful performance, in theory, the more able we are to produce an ear-wrenching performance as well. An audience might judge these two performances as “good” and “bad,” respectively. For example, Habibi can use her substantial rhetorical skill to argue for a female Iranian president, but she can also use it to justify the death sentence in Iranian law for homosexuality. From the point of view of liberalism, these ends seem at odds, and even within the Iranian Shii context someone could perceive them as striving for contradictory ends.⁹

On the one hand, I can see an advantage of a conceptual understanding of ambiguity because it would allow us to defer moral judgment. It would allow one to discuss the productive power of actions like veiling, as a cultivated skill, without having to begin with a justification of the practice in relation to specific ends, whether liberal conceptions of freedom or Islamic notions of modesty. But on the other hand, if skills are themselves morally ambiguous, how can we tell when a woman has “mastered” a skill? This ambiguity complicates not only our

⁸My analysis on skills that follows is greatly influenced by a paper Aaron Stalnaker delivered at Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions on February 2009 and to which I was respondent (Stalnaker 2009). His paper is forthcoming in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*.

⁹Although not necessarily related to skill acquisition, further ambiguity is introduced to the moral life because women are not located only in one tradition that dominates their moral world view, nor are traditions themselves closed, fixed, or homogenous. This requires a negotiation at the level of the individual with sometimes competing norms and duties, as will be discussed in more detail below.

ability to judge the actions of subjects as scholars, it also challenges our ability to describe and explain how a community evaluates piety since it is unclear how moral judgment can be grounded when skills can be directed at different moral ends.

One option is to link moral judgment of a skill to the cultivation of that skill. Consider the pianist metaphor again. A skill that looks like moral judgment is achieved by cultivating the skill of piano playing: the better a player I become, the better I will be at discerning the proficiency of others' performance and even the proficiency of my own. But this is back to the original Aristotelian problem of circularity: to know virtue one must be a good man or consult a good man, but how do we identify these good men? In fact, this circularity is found in Mahmood's own study. The women on whom she chooses to focus in the core chapters of her book are often women who are doing the sorts of things a secular liberal feminist would find admirable, such as women reading and interpreting religious texts for themselves, women teaching other women about piety, and women critiquing visions of motherhood imposed by mullahs or the secular state. It is unclear how a principle of selection regarding which women can best represent the "feminist subject" of the Islamic Revival is possible without a prior understanding of feminist subjectivity.

This challenge is related to another problem that arises in Mahmood's theory of agency when we read it against Foucault's corpus. The central problem is that her theory has no way to account for spontaneity, creativity, or what Foucault calls critique, "the art of not being governed quite as much" (2002: 193).¹⁰ Think again of the pianist: critique is the mechanism by which new forms of play get invented, educated skills become something else, and the pianist makes the piece her own. In part, Mahmood does not discuss the role of critique because she is attempting to correct the common focus on resistance to religious norms (as I said earlier, the common focus on the "bad girls" of religion). The women she studies, who are involved in a grassroots piety movement and not trying necessarily to change gendered dimensions of the moral life, also dictate Mahmood's focus on the "variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated" (2004: 23). This enactment of piety might seem to be true for Habibi; however, her actions also include things with which some Iranian clerics might not agree. For example, despite the fact that she

¹⁰I draw heavily in this section from Matt Waggoner's excellent work (see [Waggoner 2005](#)). Although based on articles published by Mahmood prior to the publication of her monograph, Waggoner's article essay is one of the most careful critiques of Mahmood's understanding of ethics.

maintains that the raising of children is the most important duty for all Muslim women, she has had a high-profile political career, leaving much of the care-giving of her children to others. And some of the women I study understand themselves to be making more explicitly creative moves within the tradition: whether influenced by feminist theory, or their own lived experiences, some would reject the categorization of their actions as obedience to dominant discursive forces and others would even claim a “feminist consciousness.” They, of all people, understand that they are habituated. And yet they push back against this habituation in meaningful ways.

The differences between our case studies aside, there is a theoretical reason that explains why a heteronomous theory of agency neglects critique: since there is no autonomous conception of the self, it is unclear from where disobedience arises. In fact at times Mahmood’s language seems to suggest that agency is assigned to the discursive traditions and not to women at all. She writes,

Even though I focus on the practices of the mosque participants, this does not mean that their activities and the operations they perform on themselves are products of their independent wills; rather, my argument is that *these activities are the products of authoritative discursive traditions* whose logic and power far exceeds the consciousness of the subjects they enable. (2004: 32, emphasis added)

The possibility for action might be within the discursive tradition, but can action really be the direct product of the tradition? This would mean neither words nor actions are expressions of the moral agency of particular actors. And it is unclear how this view of agency could support either feminist scholarship or scholarship that takes ethics, or any form of human agency, as more than merely an illusion.

Return to the Habibi story in order to more fully understand the limitations of this version of heteronomy. Assuming heteronomy might lead the scholar to interpret Habibi’s support of CEDAW as based on a western ideological import, and understand her statements against the validity of feminism as an authentic expression of agency. But pure heteronomy would be hard pressed to predict how Habibi has created her own critique of the current Iranian regime that she understands to both follow the spirit of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and also take lessons from her participation in a variety of UN-sponsored conferences focused on women.

Certainly at times the women I interviewed were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. We were engaged in a mutual act of

ventriloquism—mishearing, misreading, and ultimately misunderstanding each other. And yet, there were also moments when something else could be glimpsed through our mutual misunderstanding, especially when we assumed a similar discursive context (like the rhetoric of Khomeini). In these moments, something descriptively and analytically real came through. However, scholarship based merely on heteronomy, like scholarship based merely on autonomy although for different reasons, has no way to escape this interpretative feedback loop.

Theonomy: God, Free Will, and Bi-Level Moral Law

One possible alternative to autonomy and heteronomy, especially for a scholar of religious studies, is theonomy, or “God’s law.” Theonomy has its most influential recent articulation in the work of Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who rejected autonomy and heteronomy as not being able to fully account for the reality of religious moral lives. Tillich conceptualized the problem with autonomy and heteronomy as follows: Autonomy attempts to make reason the center of value “without regarding its depth” (Tillich 1951: 83) or its transcendent grounds. Heteronomy claims to represent “the depth of reason against its autonomous actualization” (84), but because it claims “to speak in the name of the ground of being” (1954: 76), it is hard to distinguish heteronomy from human tyranny. Heteronomy is also ultimately unattainable, according to Tillich, because “we cannot be obedient to the commands of a stranger, even if he is God” (1959: 136).

Tillich’s solution to the problems of autonomy and heteronomy is to unite them through a conception of theonomy. Theonomy has two defining characteristics:

The first quality of a theonomous culture is that it communicates the experience of holiness, of something ultimate in being and meaning, in all its creations. The second quality is the affirmation of the autonomous forms of the creative process. (1963: 251)

Notice how these two characteristics, the holiness of God and the free will of the individual, draw from the core components of heteronomy and autonomy, respectively, and in this way, Tillich argues that heteronomy and autonomy can be self-corrective if held together.

Theonomy has components that are helpful for conceptualizing a fuller range of women’s moral agency in religious communities. First, Tillich’s theonomy assumes a two-tier conception of freedom that is operative in many religious traditions (in particular the two I study, Islam and Christianity). One way to conceptualize freedom within a

theistic framework is as two sorts of events: (1) fundamental freedom is our choice to turn toward or away from God and (2) specific freedom is freedom to choose concrete actions in a given context. Decisions are made within the constraints of circumstances, but in a theistic community, believers understand themselves as always free to choose to turn toward or away from God. At this fundamental level, there is always a free subject. And in this way, habituation within a community might be an important contributory cause of what we do, even as it does not determine what is done.

A second helpful dimension of theonomy is that there are opportunities for imperfection or ambiguity within this thick understanding of freedom. Theonomy is grounded on the idea of ethics as God-determined and God-directed (250). This means that unlike autonomy and heteronomy, we cannot be completely sure we are successful in the moral life. With autonomy, if we follow the ethical principles that our reason discerns, we are a successful moral agent. In heteronomy, if we obey the external moral law completely, we are a successful moral agent. But theonomous ethics is an ongoing struggle to discern what makes up a moral life, with no certainty of ever being correct. Assuming this imperfection or ambiguity in the moral life leaves the scholar open to analyze actions that fit neither the model of complete obedience nor of dissent, and yet express moral agency.

A third helpful component of Tillich's representation of agency is that it retains a central role for reason in religion. Autonomy's assumption of a disinterested (not attached to any tradition) universal rationality has led some scholars working within it to judge religions to be irrational (e.g., Pollitt 2002). Heteronomy can also take reason entirely out of the equation: the process of discerning the moral law is the process of practicing what you are told to do. Theonomy walks a line between autonomy and heteronomy here, claiming that religions are rational, even if their rationality is particular. Tillich argues that the logics of religion are necessary for conveying to believers the particular duties of the moral life. In other words, theonomous ethics requires rhetorical exchange and the rational participation of the agent in discerning the moral law.¹¹

¹¹Tillich writes, "There is no theonomy where a valid demand of justice is rejected in the name of the holy, or where a valid act of personal self-determination is prevented by a sacred tradition, or where a new style of artistic creation is suppressed in the name of assumedly eternal forms of expressiveness. Theonomy is distorted into heteronomy in all these examples; the element of autonomy in it is removed—the freedom which characterizes the human spirit as well as the divine spirit is repressed" (1963: 251).

Theonomous ethics and religious ethics could be seen as interchangeable: religious ethics, at least for theistic religions, assumes, on some level, theonomy. But despite the resonance of theonomy with some religious conceptualizations of the moral life, I see three distinctions between a Tillich-inspired project and my own. Tillich is interested in a general re-insertion of God/religion/transcendence into ethical reflection. My interest is on a much smaller, more specific, scale. I am concerned with how women within religious communities, those who already accept God as the origin of the moral law, actually live the moral life. How do they hear, interpret, and perform the moral law as described by religious authorities? How do the heteronomous teachings of the religious leaders' (external law) *become* autonomous (internal law)? Can this process of internalization and enactment change the meaning of external law? In this way, my focus is on religious women, not God per se. This is in part a difference of disciplinary focus. Paul Tillich was a theologian, engaged in a thoroughly theological search for the *logos* of God on an ontological and metaphysical level. I am a feminist ethicist, interested in God only insofar as the women I study understand God to have importance in their moral lives. Therefore, my conception of ethics and moral agency encapsulates the concrete rhetorical and performative interplay women participate in, not solely their relationship to, or their understanding of, God.

Finally, given the empirical data that inform my scholarship, Tillich too neatly resolves the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy in theonomy. Theonomy assumes the unity of self and other through the deeper ground of divinity. This neglects what I have observed as an interaction between individuals' understandings of freedom and their interpretations of the moral law within a religious community. This interaction is sometimes manifested as an ongoing tension between autonomy and heteronomy, or better yet, as a negotiation of multiple heteronomous influences at the individual level. This interaction or negotiation, I maintain, leads to innovation in the moral life. If the problem with autonomy and heteronomy is that they both assert the triumph of one source of human freedom over another, Tillich's theonomy neglects these different sources by too-facilely fusing them in divine freedom.

In summary, theonomy is helpful for its attempt to hold the insights of autonomy and heteronomy together, its vision of freedom that resonates with the religious traditions I study, and its understanding of a central role for logical discourse in the conveying of moral duties. However, its scope and disciplinary focus, and overly optimistic assumption that the tension between autonomy and heteronomy can be

resolved, make it less than ideal as a basis for a cross-cultural study of women. After a survey of three prominent theories of agency, it is hopefully clear how none could have entirely prevented my initial misinterpretation of a Habibi's arguments.

DIANOMY: INTERPLAY, CREATIVITY, AND CONFORMITY

Since I find neither autonomy, heteronomy, nor theonomy an adequate way to conceptualize the actions of the women I study, I suggest a fourth alternative that I call dianomy. Dianomy literally means "dual law." It is dual insofar as both the autonomous and heteronomous laws are acknowledged as sources of the moral life. They are held together in dianomy, in an unresolved tension, with the emphasis being on the process by which these two sources interact. In addition to signifying two sources of the moral law, "dia" is meant to invoke exchange akin to dialectic between two individuals, like a lay-woman (auto) and a cleric (hetero), who share a group of premises. The model of agency implied in dianomy is also double: a woman is formed within a specific discursive and performative environment, but she is also able to interrogate that environment. I make this argument about religious women, but the model of agency could also be applied to any agent.

Dianomy allows for a distinct understanding of the relationship between habituation and critique that I call "creative conformity." If dianomy is a theory of moral agency, creative conformity is the types of actions this theory helps us to understand. One of Mahmood's concerns is with preventing the identification of critique or creativity where there is none. But critique in Foucault's understanding does not necessarily require an autonomous subject: "Critique often only means modes of participation that, through the particular form of their enactment, dramatize the performed rather than natural status of those conditions" (Waggoner 2005: 253). This means that creativity occurs in part because of the difference between the performed and ideal status of moral claims, virtues, and embodied skills. Critique is not radically separate from a habituated skill, but can in fact be understood as a cross-cultural virtue (perhaps the only truly universal virtue) that is necessary to navigate our habituation within multiple traditions including many that stress the good of free will.

Even if Foucault's understanding of critique, or what I am calling creativity, does not require an autonomous subject, it does imply a level of positive freedom or a free will of the subject. This does not mean, however, that creativity originates in some hypothetical space of pure freedom, unencumbered by tradition. Instead, dianomy urges us to

consider how creativity occurs within the tradition itself through conformity.

Dianomy is not purely my invention. I have already shown how Foucault influences this theory, but there are numerous scholars who work with theories akin to dianomy,¹² including several feminist scholars who have been especially instructive. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler finds limiting “any notion of autonomy that establishes the individual as alone, free of social conditions, without dependency on social instruments of various kinds” and engages in conceptual work similar to this essay’s by redefining autonomy as “a socially conditioned way of living in the world” (Butler 2004: 77). I have elected to offer a new term, dianomy, as a placeholder for autonomy’s revision because I am suspicious that autonomy can be successfully untangled from its earlier associations in feminist scholarship with universal reason, equality, and dissent. Nevertheless, Butler and I strongly agree on the need to be able to think about a subject that both arises through social conditions and can also affect these conditions.

In addition, my understanding of how critique or creativity can occur within this revised theory of agency, even if unintentionally, is informed by Butler’s analysis of the role of citation in hate speech. Butler writes, “Indeed, racist speech could not act as racist speech if it were not *a citation of itself*; only because we already know its force from its prior instances do we know it to be so offensive now, and we brace ourselves against its future invocations” (Butler 1997: 80). Butler’s situating of speech’s meaning within a specific context resonates with Mahmood’s understanding of how habituation creates the possibilities of action. They both agree that traditions (whether racism or Islam) strongly determine what sorts of things a subject can believe, say, or do. However, in contrast to Mahmood, Butler is also interested in a critical moment of rhetorical response, in the possibility of breaking from this process of citation (40). This process is critical “in the sense that it will not comply with a given category, but rather constitute an interrogatory relation to the field of categorization itself” (217).

Butler argues that this critical moment is possible because the intention and meaning of speech are not as closely linked as some scholars have claimed and that discourse is “always in some ways out of our control” (15), free to be fought over, to be defined and redefined by

¹²It is outside the scope of this paper to provide a thorough discussion of all the substantial bodies of literatures that are part of the prevailing discourses on agency and found in various disciplines, from anthropology (e.g., James Clifford, George Marcus, and Henrietta Moore) to political theory (e.g., Seyla Behabib, Jürgen Habermas, and Iris Marion Young).

both the original speaker and audience (12). This same analysis can be applied to the speech of a religious leader who may attempt to limit how practitioners believe or act. Even though this argument is deployed from a position of authority, we cannot necessarily predict how women will respond to it. I differ from Butler in that I focus not only on the critical moment of creativity but also how creativity can be re-constitutive of a tradition.¹³

The work of Azam Torab, a social anthropologist whose work focuses on Iranian women, has also been helpful for understanding creative conformity. Her work on prayer meetings in Tehran explores “simultaneous processes of complicity as well as resistance” (1996: 235) which resonates with my notion of creative conformity. Torab argues that this complicit resistance is possible because women have multiple selves since they are formed by several discourses at the same time:

The notion of multiple selves does not mean the disappearance of powerful discourses, but their realignment under contest. It is therefore not simply that there are multiple discourses within cultures, but in addition, individuals themselves are multiply constituted, which allows them the scope to act on the world in which they live. (2007: 248–249)

I differ from Torab because of the prominent role of intentionality in her theory, which signals that at some level she is concerned with resistance as opposed to the tactical engagement that does not assume a prior teleology.

R. Marie Griffith’s (1997) work on charismatic evangelical women is also theoretically akin to dianomy as she attempts to explain the “meaning of women’s continued adherence to the doctrine of submission and authority” (14). Griffith’s work, published in 1997, was groundbreaking at the time for arguing for a different approach to conservative religious women as objects of academic study. Griffith finds that women’s devotional narratives uncover a “dialectic of female submission and empowerment” (199) through which “women rework the social roles they inhabit” (16). For example, she discovers “a high degree of innovation, not to mention historical development, in [Aglow Fellowship] women’s interpretation of female submission” (14). This is all similar to the types of creative conformity I hope to capture with dianomy.

Griffith’s work and mine diverge, however, in two important ways. First, although to a lesser degree than Torab, there is concern in Griffith’s

¹³I am indebted to Amy Hollywood for my reading of Butler’s work on citation (Hollywood 2002: 93–115).

work with representing women as they see themselves, which results in a privileging of their stated intentions.¹⁴ Second, despite her self-disclosed struggle “against the temptation to romanticize resistance” she tends to focus on how the evangelical women “continuously redraw and renegotiate the boundaries of power and authority” (16). This is because one of Griffith’s claims is that much historical work on twentieth-century religious women is based on a disdain for women who are perceived of as “conservative religious women.” In Foucault’s terms, Griffith is concerned with highlighting conservative women’s critique as a way to rehabilitate their agency; in my terms, she is emphasizing the creative part of the creative conformity. However, creativity does not only critique, it can also be re-constitutive of a tradition: Habibi is not only reworking social and religious norms, she is also providing carefully reasoned explanations for why they must endure. I offer *dianomy* not only to rehabilitate the actions of conservative women as signs of real agency, but rather also to understand that even the actions of women perceived of as “progressive religious women” (such as Muslims who reject the veil) are no more creative and no less conforming than the actions of the women of Griffith’s and Mahmood’s studies. In other words, *dianomy* is trying to understand the tactical moves of a wide range of women within religious communities in order to further unsettle the notion that religious women are necessarily more constrained than any other group.

But this means that, unlike Griffith’s, Torab’s and even Mahmood’s work, I have not avoided entirely the issue of offending the women I study. Indeed to a large degree, a project grounded on *dianomy* will likely cause reactions from the women studied that rival Habibi’s table slamming. This is due mainly to the fact that it allows the women to be analyzed within a continuum of creativity and conformity. Certainly, some of the women I study will bristle at the thought of “conforming” to their religious traditions, particularly if tradition is understood in terms of the logics of male clerics. Other women will be just as offended by the suggestion that they are being innovative, since their intention is to be faithful to their tradition. But it is by looking at their arguments within this middle space, as political actions that both obey and dissent from a given context, even when not intentionally, that the possibility of a new type of comparative study of creative conformity emerges.

¹⁴Griffith writes, “In attempting to treat my subjects empathically and listen carefully to their stories . . . I have taken pains to credit their piety as a meaningful source of religious and social power, laden with copious practical strategies for inverting conventional hierarchies and enabling women to influence husbands—perhaps even change or save them—and alter their family lives, as well as to create newly whole and joyful selves” (201–202).

Dianomy has a number of advantages over autonomy or heteronomy for interpreting women's actions. The most general lesson dianomy takes from heteronomy is that the possibilities of actions are to some extent local. In this way, dianomy is not meant to be a universal theory of agency, other than its assertion that in order to understand women's actions we need to understand some aspect of their context. In my current project, clerical rhetoric is used to provide some understanding of religious women's context: inquiry into arguments *about* women are used to understand what is said *by* women.

Dianomy understands dynamic interplay to be central to the moral life. In contrast to autonomy, which focuses on individual reason as a source of the moral law, or heteronomy, which focuses on habituation, dianomy focuses on the interaction between reasons and habits, multiple sources of external norms, and clerical and lay *nomos*. This moves us from considering feminist ethics only as women's praxis or as determined by clerical gendered teachings to seeing it as an ongoing process of moral reasoning and response.

This dual nature of dianomy is able to account for the ambiguity, partiality, and imperfection in the moral life. Since agents have direct access only to autonomous moral law, their ethical actions and arguments are in some way dependent on a creative process of perceiving and negotiating multiple sources of heteronomous law. The movement from law to practice is also ambiguous. This process relies on the unpredictable actions of hearing, understanding, and interpreting discourse. Take again Mahmood's metaphor of an agent as pianist and the moral life as performance. In contrast to a pianist's sheet music, life does not have a fully articulated script: there are unanticipated aspects of every moral performance.

Agency as creative conformity moves away from an idea of empowerment that depends on an autonomous place of perfect freedom. In contrast, creative conformity considers self-representation of women who still see themselves as existing within the structure of other representations, and as operating inside those lines. In this way, dianomy provides a way to consider the ability to critique as part of the model of habituation: even as local discursive contours create the possibilities and restraints on action, freedom can exist itself as a situated norm within the discursive space.

Finally, dianomy confronts one of the potentially glaring weaknesses of ethnography-based research: the tendency to accept at face-value the self-understanding of one's subjects, rather than interpret and even interrogate it as in part ideological. This tendency is seen to some extent in Mahmood, Torab's and even Griffith's work. Scholars should

question our sources and informants. We should be able to both respect these women and yet not allow their intent to dictate what can be understood about their actions. In my own work, for example, I do not investigate the intentionality behind the women's rhetoric. I am interested in the process women use to construct their own visions of their moral lives using components of informal argumentation within a religious tradition—even when they see themselves as dissenting from this logic—and shift others—even when they see themselves to be reiterating clerical visions of women's proper roles. In fact, the issue of intended orthodoxy or reform is irrelevant in this analysis because dianomy interprets all obedience as innovative and creative, and all dissent as submissive and conforming.

CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, I have been building a specific conceptualization of agency as dianomy in order to understand women's actions as creative conformity. In its most general articulation, dianomy entails insights of both autonomy and heteronomy: (1) some of the conditions of agency arise within discursive traditions of habituation, and (2) others are unanticipated by this context. Therefore, we need to understand some aspect of the heteronomous law in order to understand the specific performativity of women's actions within a given discursive space. Dianomy is meant to reflect how this interaction creates a productive tension for women and how the possibilities of their actions are simultaneously productive of, and derivative from, rhetorical parameters. Dianomy is not meant to serve as a fully articulated theory of agency, but rather a justification for why and how we need to conceptualize agency locally in every project. Creative conformity, on the other hand, characterizes the types of actions this concept of agency encourages us to pursue in our scholarship. In the case of religious women, creative conformity comprises actions that may not produce ends that appears "feminist" within a secular-liberal framework, nor necessary align with the intentions of the agent, but nonetheless influence gendered norms about the moral life.

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