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Relational Freedom: Reframing Liberty through Feminist and Ecological Ethics of Care

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Abstract

This paper places the concept of freedom at the center of feminist and ecological ethics of care. It challenges dominant liberal accounts of liberty understood as self-sufficiency or unconstrained choice and instead advances a conception of relational freedom, defined as the genuine capacity to initiate and sustain worthwhile actions with and for others within supportive social and ecological conditions.

First, drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan, the paper argues that freedom is not merely the absence of interference but the presence of developed moral capacities—such as attentiveness, responsiveness, and responsibility—that enable individuals to navigate concrete relationships without coercion, neglect, or disregard. On this view, freedom expands when relations of care enhance rather than constrain agency, when dependency is met with support rather than stigma, and when harm is prevented through sustained moral attention.

Second, following Joan Tronto, the paper emphasizes the public and institutional dimensions of freedom. When care work is rendered invisible, unequally distributed, or structurally unsupported, many individuals lack the time, energy, and material resources required to exercise meaningful choice. Institutions that recognize care, distribute it justly, and protect time sovereignty create the social conditions under which liberty can be substantively exercised rather than merely formally affirmed.

Third, drawing on Val Plumwood, the paper demonstrates that relational freedom requires an ecological perspective. Dualisms such as human versus nature and mind versus body sustain hierarchical frameworks that obscure material dependencies. When ecosystems are degraded, exposure to harm increases and practical options diminish; although formal rights may remain intact, the substance of freedom is undermined. Relational autonomy reconceives the self as ecologically embedded, such that the protection of living systems constitutes a foundational condition of freedom rather than an external moral constraint.

The paper concludes by proposing a framework for assessing relational freedom as expanding where domination is reduced and where supportive human and ecological relationships are actively sustained.

Keywords: freedom, relational autonomy, care, interdependence, ecology, justice.

1. Introduction and methodology

The concept of freedom occupies a central place in political and ethical inquiry; however, dominant theoretical paradigms continue to rely on an image of the individual as a self-regulating and self-determining agent. Since Isaiah Berlin's canonical distinction between negative and positive liberty, philosophical debates have largely oscillated between defending freedom as noninterference and conceiving it as self-mastery or self-realization (Berlin, 1969). Despite their differences, both approaches presuppose a conception of the self as bounded, internally transparent, and capable of autonomous choice independent of its social and ecological conditions. Although highly influential, such accounts increasingly appear insufficient for explaining how agency is actually formed, sustained, and exercised.

In response, a growing body of feminist, critical, and ecological scholarship has challenged individualistic models of autonomy by demonstrating that agency is a relational achievement shaped through networks of care, institutional arrangements, and ecological stability. Feminist ethicists such as Carol Gilligan have shown that moral reasoning develops within concrete relational contexts rather than through abstract principles. Similarly, political theorists such as Joan Tronto argue that democratic freedom depends on institutions that recognize, value, and equitably distribute care. Environmental philosophers—most notably Val Plumwood—further contend that human autonomy is materially grounded in ecological systems, the degradation of which directly constrains human agency. Taken together, these perspectives point toward the necessity of a relational reconceptualization of freedom.

Methodologically, this article adopts a philosophical hermeneutic approach grounded in close textual analysis of three foundational works: Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, Tronto's *Moral Boundaries and Caring Democracy*, and Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. These texts are interpreted as articulating complementary dimensions of a relational ontology of freedom. The central argument advanced here is that freedom is neither merely an individual capacity nor solely a political arrangement, but rather a relational accomplishment emerging from the interaction of moral competencies, institutional structures, and ecological conditions. By integrating feminist moral psychology, care-centered political theory, and ecofeminist philosophy, this article develops a unified framework of relational freedom that treats care, democracy, and ecological integrity as co-constitutive conditions of agency.

2. Carol Gilligan: Moral Voice, Relational Agency, and the Foundations of Autonomy

Carol Gilligan's contribution to a relational conception of freedom lies in her demonstration that the capacities enabling agency are cultivated through relationships rather than through separation. Her central insight is that moral voice itself emerges in connection. As Gilligan explains, voice expresses "the sound of a mind that is connected to other minds" (Gilligan, 1982). This claim challenges developmental

models that equate maturity with independence and separation, revealing instead that autonomy can take the form of sustaining relationships without a loss of self. On this account, freedom cannot be understood solely as an internal capacity of will; rather, it is a developmental achievement shaped by relational environments.

By reframing moral development as relational rather than hierarchical, Gilligan provides a moral-psychological foundation for relational freedom. Autonomy emerges not through detachment, but through environments that support voice, recognition, and mutual responsiveness. Individuals who lack such relational support may formally possess rights yet remain unable to act freely in practice. Gilligan's work thus demonstrates that freedom is not secured by independence alone, but by the presence of relationships that sustain moral voice and enable agency under conditions of interdependence.

Gilligan also emphasizes that moral reasoning grounded in care is not limited to women. Although *In a Different Voice* foregrounds female experiences, the relational orientation she describes is presented as a human capacity rather than a gendered trait. As Gilligan clarifies, "The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but by theme" (Gilligan, 1982). This distinction is crucial. Gilligan does not essentialize women as caregivers; rather, she uses women's experiences to reveal dimensions of moral life neglected by dominant moral theories. The ethic of care thus emerges as a universal human possibility and a necessary framework for understanding how freedom operates within relational contexts.

Beyond moral psychology, Gilligan's critique challenges philosophical assumptions about the self. She argues that moral dilemmas frequently arise not from conflicts between abstract rights but from the complex negotiation of responsibilities within relationships. Freedom, therefore, must be conceptualized not only as self-determination but as an ongoing negotiation between self and other. In this sense, *In a Different Voice* provides ethical and psychological grounding for relational freedom as a form of autonomy rooted in connection, mutual recognition, and the cultivation of moral voice.

A further key insight in Gilligan's work is her understanding of moral agency as relational competence. Individuals who can recognize and respond to the needs of others without effacing their own interests exhibit a mature form of autonomy. As Gilligan states, "Responsibility and care are the central moral concerns" (Gilligan, 1982). This formulation reflects a model of agency in which freedom involves balancing one's own needs with those of others. Autonomy is not rejected but situated within relationships, aligning closely with the conception of relational freedom developed in this article—namely, freedom as the capacity to act meaningfully within relational, institutional, and ecological contexts.

The relational orientation Gilligan describes also carries important implications for public life and political agency. If moral voice emerges through relationships, democratic participation likewise depends on relational capacities. Individuals must be able to articulate their perspectives, listen to others, and engage differences without fear of domination or silencing. Gilligan's work thus contributes to democratic theory by demonstrating that freedom in public life is grounded in relational competencies

nurtured in private life. The sharp division between public and private spheres, central to liberal political thought, is destabilized by her analysis. Freedom instead appears as a holistic capacity shaped by both intimate relationships and public institutions. Finally, Gilligan offers a crucial feminist corrective to theories of autonomy that celebrate self-sufficiency and rational detachment. She argues that “the failure to see the connection between relationships and responsibility obscures the experience of women” (Gilligan, 1982). This critique reveals that autonomy cannot be adequately understood without acknowledging the relational conditions under which individuals develop and act. Far from weakening autonomy, the ethic of care strengthens it by grounding agency in relational reality.

Gilligan’s account thus establishes the moral-psychological foundations of relational freedom by demonstrating that agency develops through relationships of care and recognition. However, moral capacities alone are insufficient to secure freedom in practice. Even a well-developed moral voice cannot be sustained without the material, temporal, and institutional conditions that allow individuals to participate fully in social and political life. To understand how relational agency is enabled or constrained beyond the interpersonal sphere, it is therefore necessary to examine the political organization of care. This shift brings the analysis to Joan Tronto, whose work illuminates how democratic institutions structure the possibilities of freedom through their treatment of dependency and caregiving.

3. Joan Tronto: Care, Democratic Life, and the Institutional Conditions of Freedom

Joan Tronto occupies a central place in contemporary feminist political philosophy by reconceptualizing democracy through the lens of care. Whereas Carol Gilligan demonstrates that moral agency develops within relationships, Tronto shows that such relational capacities can mature into meaningful autonomy only when supported by appropriate institutional structures. On her account, freedom is not secured by individual moral competence alone but depends on social arrangements that recognize dependency and distribute care responsibilities fairly. Tronto thus supplies the political and institutional dimension of relational freedom.

In *Moral Boundaries* and *Caring Democracy*, Tronto challenges liberal assumptions that confine care to the private sphere and portray citizens as fundamentally independent. She defines care as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world” (Tronto, 1993), thereby situating care as the largely invisible infrastructure of social and political life. Modern societies, however, tend to marginalize this labor by rendering it feminized, privatized, and undervalued. When care is ignored or displaced onto individuals and families, citizens may formally possess rights while lacking the material and temporal conditions necessary to exercise them. Autonomy, in this sense, is materially and temporally grounded rather than merely juridical.

Tronto’s analysis of the public–private divide exposes how the depoliticization of care functions as a mechanism of domination. By relegating care to the private realm, political theory obscures the labor that sustains citizenship and democratic

participation. As Tronto observes, “the moral boundaries that divide the political from the personal hide the real labor that makes political life possible” (Tronto, 1993). Those who perform care work are excluded from political recognition, while those who benefit from care remain insulated from its costs. A relational conception of freedom therefore requires institutional recognition of care as a public value rather than a private burden.

To evaluate how institutions enable or constrain freedom, Tronto develops a normative framework of care consisting of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. These dimensions operate as political criteria rather than merely interpersonal virtues. Institutions that fail to recognize social needs, distribute care unjustly, or provide care incompetently reproduce domination by exhausting individuals’ time, energy, and capacities for participation. Inadequate or unresponsive care heightens vulnerability and contracts the space for agency, even where formal liberties remain intact.

A central concept in *Caring Democracy* is time sovereignty. Tronto argues that democratic freedom requires meaningful control over one’s time in order to reflect, deliberate, and participate in collective life. When care burdens are privatized or disproportionately imposed on already marginalized groups, individuals may retain formal political rights while lacking the time necessary to exercise them. Under such conditions, freedom becomes hollow, as citizens are structurally excluded from participation by the demands of unpaid or unsupported care. Time thus emerges as a political good shaped by labor regimes, welfare institutions, and social norms.

Against the liberal ideal of independence, Tronto insists that dependency is a universal and unavoidable feature of human life. The normative issue is not whether dependency exists, but how societies organize and respond to it. When care responsibilities are distributed unjustly, freedom becomes unequal; when they are shared and publicly supported, freedom expands. As Tronto writes, “democracy becomes caring when it creates the conditions that allow all citizens to participate fully” (Tronto, 2013). Autonomy, therefore, is not independence from others but the capacity to act within institutions that sustain relational life.

Tronto’s political theory is both diagnostic and constructive. She calls for a reimagining of democratic life that places care at its center and reconceives citizenship as a shared responsibility for maintaining the conditions of agency. A caring democracy, she argues, is one in which individuals possess “the freedom to care and to be cared for without sacrifice to their participation in public life” (Tronto, 2013). Within this framework, freedom is a collective achievement rather than an individual possession, grounded in institutions that recognize dependency, secure time sovereignty, and grant political voice to care.

By extending relational freedom into the political domain, Tronto demonstrates that autonomy cannot be separated from the institutional organization of care. Her work shows that freedom depends not only on moral capacities, but on democratic structures capable of sustaining the relational conditions of life. This political grounding of relational freedom prepares the way for its ecological extension, where agency is further shaped by the integrity of the natural systems upon which care,

time, and democratic participation ultimately depend.

4. Val Plumwood: Ecological Integrity, Human Embeddedness, and Freedom as Coexistence

Val Plumwood extends the relational account of freedom by exposing how dominant Western conceptions of autonomy depend on the systematic denial of ecological and social dependency. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, she demonstrates that freedom has historically been constructed through a logic of domination that elevates rational, autonomous man while subordinating women, nature, animals, and colonized peoples. This hierarchy is not incidental but foundational to modern ideals of autonomy: freedom for some has been secured through the erasure of the relational and ecological conditions that sustain life. By foregrounding the ecological embeddedness of human agency, Plumwood shows that autonomy cannot be maintained independently of the living systems that make action possible. To explain why ecological degradation directly undermines freedom, she turns to the conceptual structures that organize Western thought itself.

Plumwood locates the roots of ecological domination in what she terms the “master model of reason,” a conception of rationality that defines freedom as transcendence over the body, emotion, and nature. Consolidated during the Enlightenment, this model produces a dualistic worldview in which the rational, autonomous subject is separated from—and elevated above—embodied, dependent, and natural life. As Plumwood argues, these hierarchies are gendered and political rather than neutral, presenting domination as rational and dependence as deficiency. Within this framework, autonomy is misrecognized as distance from nature rather than participation in ecological relations.

The logic of mastery underpinning dominant Western conceptions of freedom is sustained through a set of interlocking dualisms, including human/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion, culture/nature, and autonomy/dependency. These dualisms operate by denying continuity and mutual dependence, backgrounding the contributions of what is cast as “other,” and reducing nonhuman life to a passive resource for human use. In doing so, they generate the illusion of an autonomous subject whose freedom appears independent of ecological and relational conditions. Plumwood shows that this conceptual structure does not merely distort understandings of nature but actively legitimizes domination, exploitation, and environmental degradation. Freedom, when grounded in such dualisms, is achieved through denial rather than reciprocity; it depends on the erasure of the very relationships that sustain life. A relational conception of freedom therefore requires dismantling these dualistic logics and replacing them with an ontology that recognizes ecological embeddedness, continuity, and mutual vulnerability as the material conditions of agency.

Against the ideal of autonomous mastery, Plumwood advances an ecological ontology of mutuality in which humans are understood as participants within more-than-human communities. Freedom, in this view, becomes the capacity to live within ecological relationships that sustain life rather than the power to dominate them.

Ecological responsibility thus appears not as a limitation on autonomy but as one of its preconditions, grounding freedom in practices that preserve the conditions of both human and nonhuman flourishing.

One of Plumwood's most significant contributions to relational freedom is her critique of the logic of mastery itself. She argues that the domination of nature and the domination of marginalized groups share a common rationality, one that constructs the subordinate as inferior, irrational, and exploitable. As she writes, "the logic of mastery constructs freedom as control, independence, and distance from nature" (Plumwood, 1993). This conception of freedom is fundamentally incompatible with ecological sustainability. It encourages practices that degrade the environment, reproduce social injustice, and foreclose future possibilities for agency. Plumwood therefore calls for a relational understanding of freedom that defines autonomy not as control but as coexistence. Freedom becomes a practice of sustaining relationships rather than transcending them.

Plumwood's critique of capitalism follows directly from this insight. She argues that capitalist economies intensify ecological exploitation by commodifying natural resources and treating ecosystems as externalities. As she observes, capitalism relies on the systematic backgrounding of nature's contributions, thereby obscuring the true costs of ecological degradation (Plumwood, 1993). This economic invisibility permits states and corporations to exploit ecosystems without regard for their regenerative limits. The resulting environmental crises—such as climate change, deforestation, and species extinction—undermine the material foundations of freedom itself. Plumwood's analysis thus reveals that a relational theory of freedom must confront not only philosophical dualism but also the economic structures that institutionalize those dualisms. Autonomy, on this account, ultimately requires ecological justice.

5. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that the traditional conception of autonomy as individual self-sufficiency is insufficient for understanding the conditions that make freedom possible. The contributions of Carol Gilligan, Joan Tronto, and Val Plumwood collectively reveal that freedom is not a solitary achievement but a relational accomplishment. Human beings are constituted through interpersonal relationships, enabled by institutional arrangements, and sustained by ecological systems. Freedom depends on the integrity of these interrelated domains; when any one of them is undermined, the capacity for autonomous action is correspondingly diminished.

Gilligan's work shows that autonomy originates in relationships of care. Through supportive interactions, individuals develop moral voice, emotional awareness, and relational competence—capacities that form the psychological foundation of agency. In the absence of such relationships, individuals may be silenced, fragmented, or unable to act in accordance with their own moral understanding of the world.

Tronto extends this insight into the political domain by demonstrating that democratic participation requires material resources, time, recognition, and the just distribution

of care responsibilities. Freedom is severely constrained for those whose lives are dominated by caregiving demands or economic precarity. Tronto thus reveals autonomy as a collective achievement, sustained by institutions that acknowledge human dependency and create the conditions for equal participation in public life.

Plumwood further expands the relational framework by situating freedom within its ecological context. She shows that dominant Western ideals of mastery, independence, and rational transcendence are grounded in the denial of ecological interdependence. Human agency is materially dependent on healthy ecosystems, and the degradation of these systems erodes the conditions necessary for meaningful freedom. Plumwood's ecological ontology makes clear that autonomy is possible only within relationships that sustain the conditions of life itself.

Taken together, the insights of Gilligan, Tronto, and Plumwood generate a multidimensional account of relational freedom that challenges liberal dichotomies between individual and community, public and private, and human and nature. By foregrounding the web of dependencies that shape human life, this reconceptualization defines autonomy as the capacity to participate in relationships that support well-being, enable mutual recognition, and preserve ecological integrity. Such a framework not only advances moral, political, and environmental theory but also offers critical resources for addressing contemporary challenges, including democratic erosion, social inequality, and climate change.

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