

Power and Personal Relationships¹

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Introduction

Philosophical work on power has been wide ranging, analysing how power operates in various political, social, and economic domains. Yet one site of power which has received comparatively less attention is intimate relationships. Romantic relationships, friendships, and family relationships all involve highly complex power relations. In the first half of this chapter, I begin the task of remedying this neglect, by examining how power functions in such relationships. I argue that intimates enjoy significant levels of power over one another on account of the distinctive degrees of exposure and dependency that are often constitutive of intimate relationships. This power is necessary, I will argue, for the realisation of many valuable goods, like trust and care.

Power is not always distributed equally in intimate relationships; sometimes it is highly asymmetric. Some relationships involving asymmetric power relations are clearly objectionable – consider, for example, abusive relationships. Yet other relationships involving power asymmetries seem less obviously concerning. Consider, for example, parent-child relationships, or romantic relationships in which one partner provides significant care to the other due to disability or injury.

While the latter kinds of relationship seem comparatively benign, they may nonetheless qualify as *dominating*, according to a theory in political philosophy known as republicanism. Republicans argue that it is bad to be dominated, i.e., to be in a position of vulnerability where a more powerful person could interfere arbitrarily in your life. Whilst traditional theories of freedom emphasise the badness of actually being interfered with, republicans stress that it is bad to be *vulnerable* to interference. This explains, for example, why it is bad to live under a benevolent dictator – this would involve unacceptable insecurity. If domination is objectionable, it seems there is at least one respect in which many caring relationships are objectionable,

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because one person is vulnerable to the other's interference. I call this the 'care problem'.

The care problem is a problem for republican theory in particular, in so far as it shows that the theory may have counter-intuitive implications. Yet we can also see it as a more general problem: intimate relationships present us with a moral double bind. They are clearly highly valuable, and yet they often involve power asymmetries that, in non-intimate contexts, would likely be considered objectionable.

In the second half of this chapter, I explain the care problem and consider some different ways we might resolve it. As for the challenge it poses to republicanism, I propose that we have the following strategies available to us: abandoning the concept of domination; tinkering with its definition so as to exclude caring relationships from its scope; and simply biting the bullet, by granting that many asymmetric caring relationships, however much love and trust they involve, are indeed objectionable in some sense. I will endorse the latter strategy but show that this is compatible with thinking that in some cases, reducing domination is less important than promoting other valuable goods.

More generally, I make the case that, perhaps surprisingly, the weighty value of some intimate relationships depends on the presence of morally non-ideal relations. Recognising that such relationships are morally fraught is not only theoretically interesting but should also shape how we think about their treatment in policy and law.

1. Intimate power

Power is a feature of most personal relationships, but plays a particularly complex role in *intimate relationships*, like those between romantic partners, friends, or family members. Such relationships typically involve reciprocal love, affection, care, intimacy, and trust, as well as sustained patterns of interaction and proximity, and they radically shape our identities and senses of self.

When I speak of power, I have in mind *power over*, rather than *power to*, and I focus in particular on power wielded by agents vis-à-vis other agents, rather than power wielded by or over structures or practices.² I understand such power in roughly Weberian terms as an agent's actual ability to influence another agent's actions (Weber 1947). On a standard Weberian construal, I

² On the distinction between power over and power to, see Pitkin (1972).

have power over you if I can cause you to do things you otherwise would not do.³ We can add to this that I have power over you if I can also affect how you behave in other ways, for example by raising or lowering the costs and benefits of various options available to you, or by influencing your preferences for different options.

Power over any person – be they an intimate or a stranger – can come from many sources. For example, Phillip Pettit lists as resources of power ‘physical strength, technical advantage, financial clout, political authority, social connections, communal standing, informational access, ideological position, cultural legitimation, and the like’ (1999, 59).⁴ In intimate relationships, some of each person’s power over the other may be attributable to these resources or properties, most of which are external to or independent of the relationship itself. However, I propose that there are also two distinctive features of intimate relationships themselves that give rise to power; exposure and dependence. These hallmark features of intimate relationships give intimates considerable power over the other, even when they possess none of the social resources of power Pettit identifies.

1.a Exposure

One characteristic feature of intimate relationships which creates power is exposure. Friends, partners, and family members expose aspects of themselves to one another that they do not typically reveal to others.⁵ We can think of this exposure as affording the other person both privileged *knowledge* and privileged *access*.

It is part and parcel of being in an intimate relationship with someone that you possess privileged *knowledge* of one another. You come to know and understand one another in ways few others do. Your romantic partner, friend, or family member will, for example, acquire knowledge about your emotions, your hopes and fears, and your personal history. You may deliberately give

³ See Dahl (1957) for a similar understanding of power.

⁴ Cecile Laborde helpfully distinguishes between agent-relative sources of power (‘I can dominate you by virtue of my personal resources, such as my superior strength, intelligence, cunning, ambition’) and systemic sources of power (‘I can dominate you by virtue of my location in a specific institutional system’) (2010, 57). While I will return to the implications of her distinction for thinking about domination in particular later on, it is worth pointing out that Laborde seems to be neglecting a third source of power. One person can accrue considerable power over another not because of any personal properties they have, like strength or skill, nor because of their social role, but rather because of the nature of the personal relationship they come to stand in with that person.

⁵ For psychological work on exposure in intimate relationships, see Reis and Shaver (1988) and Prager (1995).

them this knowledge through acts of disclosure, but they can also acquire it through sustained proximity to and interaction with you.

This knowledge of one another facilitates important goods. Laurence Thomas argues that self-disclosure in particular enables the development of trust; revealing your secrets to a friend shows good will to them and offers them an opportunity to show their good will to you in return, by responding sensitively and by keeping the secrets (1987). Knowing another person well also enables one to better care for them and meet their needs. A good carer is able not only to respond adeptly to manifestations or expressions of need, but also to pre-empt them, something only possible when they have extensive knowledge of the person they care for.

However, a person who knows you well is also well placed to interfere in your choices; they know exactly what to do to hurt you and to frustrate your desires. If you disclose the deepest parts of yourself to them, you open yourself up to feeling profoundly recognised and validated by them, but also to being deeply wounded by them if they criticise, reject, or fail to understand who you are as a person. They might also weaponise their knowledge of you, using it to exploit and manipulate you. They could, for example, threaten to expose you, or deliberately stoke your deepest fears, to get you to behave as they want you to. As George Tsai writes, ‘the greater openness between friends, and the greater expectations of trust, imply greater vulnerability’ (2022, 324).

Exposure in intimate relationships can also take the form of privileged *access*. Friends, family, and partners do not merely learn a lot about you but also perceive you and interact with you in privileged ways. They will typically be able to interact with you more often and for longer periods of time, and access a less ‘filtered’ version of you, as we tend to feel more able to ‘be ourselves’ around friends and family. Additionally, they enjoy privileged physical access to us, in the form of closer physical proximity and the ability to engage in various forms of touch usually not permissible between non-intimates. This is most extreme in the case of children, whose parents have largely unfettered access to their bodies.

This kind of exposure is also Janus-faced. It enables moments of great intimacy – a liberating feeling of sharing yourself with another person and really being seen, and a sense of great comfort and safety. Yet to be accessible to another is to be vulnerable to them. Imagine your friend or partner insults you when you are at your weakest point, in a moment of emotional crisis. This will likely hurt more than it otherwise would, because you lack recourse to standard emotional and psychological defences. As Marilyn Friedman writes, ‘special relationships, in corrupt, abusive, or degenerate forms, make

possible certain uncommon emotional harms not even possible in impersonal relationships' (1993, 130). Similarly, a person who has unrestricted physical access to you has more opportunities to carry out physical abuse, and can do so when you are least able to protect yourself. This partly explains why children are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse within the family.

1.b Dependence

Another source of power in intimate relationships is *dependence*. Intimates typically come to depend on each other in a variety of ways. One such kind of dependence is *reliance*; to be dependent in this sense is 'to be in circumstances in which one must rely on the care of other individuals to access, provide or secure (one or more of) one's needs, and promote and support the development of one's autonomy or agency' (Dodds 2013, 183). Such reliance occurs when the resource you need is not readily available from other sources.

The needs in question can be basic physical needs – for food, shelter, and security, for example – as well as educational, economic, emotional, and social needs. In the case of parent-child relationships, the child depends on their parent to meet practically all of these needs. Without their parent (or some other guardian) caring for them, the child would be 'bereft of life-sustaining resources' (Kittay 1999, 30–31). In other relationships, intimates may depend on one another to meet a more circumscribed range of needs. One spouse might depend on the other economically, but not educationally, for example. Often intimates come to depend on one another for the provision of various social goods, like affection. This is especially so in monogamous romantic relationships, where there is often an implicit or explicit agreement that neither party may seek these goods elsewhere.

When you depend on someone to meet your needs, they acquire power over you, and the greater your need, the greater their power.⁶ They gain the ability to manipulate and exploit you, to make you do things you do not want to do and to drive hard bargains, all because your reliance on them means you have few options other than complying. Consider, for example, a parent who threatens to withhold food from a child who is not doing as they are told.

Another kind of dependence which develops in intimate relationships is ontological. It is a hallmark of intimate relationships that each person's self becomes entangled in some way with the other's. Some philosophers think of this as a kind of union. Robert Nozick argues, for example, that lovers pool

⁶ Indeed, some sociologists conceive of all power as rooted in dependency (Emerson 1962).

their wellbeing, such that ‘when something bad happens to one you love [...], something bad also happens to you’ (Nozick 1991, 417). Bennett Helm similarly claims that one ‘intimately identifies’ with a beloved, in so far as one comes to ‘share his values for his sake and so, in this sense, to take his identity to heart’ (2009, 51). For Onora O’Neill, when two people love each other, ‘each forms some desires which incorporate or refer to the other’s desires, and consequently finds his or her happiness in some ways contingent upon the fulfilment of the other’s desires’ (1985, 270).⁷

Ontological dependence is not a matter of me relying on you to meet my needs; rather it is a matter of my needs becoming your needs and vice versa, or, if one balks at ‘union’ talk, of our needs and interests becoming tethered to each other. This, like more straightforward reliance, creates complex power relations: your flourishing depends on my flourishing, and vice versa, so decisions we each make about our own lives inevitably affect the other’s life, too – for the better and for the worse. Once we are enmeshed, there are more ways each of our lives could go well, but also more ways each of our lives could go badly. I can therefore manipulate you not just by threatening to directly harm you, but also by showing that your non-compliance will hurt *me*, and thus, also you.

2. Domination

Intimate power can be distributed in different patterns, due to differing kinds, amounts and combinations of exposure and dependence. I turn my focus now to relationships in which power is unevenly distributed, such that one person wields more power over the other. Often, such relationships involve what republican theorists call *domination*, an objectionable form of unfreedom. For some power asymmetric relationships, like abusive relationships, the claim that there is domination is highly intuitive. For others, like parent-child relationships, or adult relationships in which one partner provides physical care to the other, this judgement is far less intuitive.

2.a Abuse and domination

Consider a paradigmatic abusive relationship, in which the abuser has rendered his partner entirely dependent upon him for meeting all of her needs, and instituted high penalties for her seeking support elsewhere, challenging

⁷ See also Fisher (1990), Solomon (1988) and Cocking and Kennett (1998). For a feminist critique of the union theory of love, see Friedman (1998).

him, or attempting to leave the relationship. He regularly subjects her to physical coercion and emotional abuse, so much so that she lives in fear of him. One reason to object to this relationship is that the behaviours of the abuser clearly both wrong and harm the victim. However, one might also object to such a relationship on the grounds that the abuser possesses an objectionable kind of power: part of what is objectionable about it is not what the abuser does, but what he *could* do, especially when what he could do to his partner is much more extensive than what she could do to him. The latter concern can be fleshed out by appealing to the republican concept of domination.⁸

One person dominates another, according to Philip Pettit, if they possess the ability to interfere on an arbitrary basis in the other's choices (1996; 1999). Interference consists of intentionally worsening a person's choice situation, which one could do by changing the options available to them or changing the expected payoffs of those options (1996, 579). Interference is arbitrary if it is constrained only by the whims of the interferer and not forced to track the interests or opinions of the person interfered with (Pettit 1999).⁹

Republicans argue that we ought to think of freedom as non-domination, i.e., as not being vulnerable to the arbitrary interference of someone else. This is an alternative to conceptions of freedom as the absence of interference (Berlin 1958). If freedom consists in the mere absence of interference, then a person enslaved by a benevolent master, who treats her well and largely leaves her to her own devices but could turn on a dime and persecute her at any minute, is seemingly free. So too is a woman married to a benevolent husband in a patriarchal society (Pettit 1996; 1999).

However free these agents may feel on a day-to-day basis, their 'freedom' is conditional on someone else's graces and forbearance (the master's or the husband's), and were these figures to exercise their power to less benevolent purposes, the agents in question would have limited recourse. Whatever 'freedom' they enjoy does not seem particularly robust, and thus not particularly valuable.

⁸ I will draw predominantly on Pettit's understanding of domination, but see also Skinner (1997) and Lovett (2010).

⁹ There are several competing accounts of arbitrariness in the domination literature. Frank Lovett proposes understanding arbitrariness in procedural terms: power is arbitrary 'to the extent that its potential exercise is not externally constrained by effective rules, procedures, or goals that are common knowledge to all persons or groups concerned' (2010, 96). In contrast, I opt in this paper for what Pettit calls a substantial account of arbitrariness, according to which interference is arbitrary if it is not forced to track the interests of the person interfered with (Pettit 1999, see also Arnold and Harris 2017). Pettit has since adopted a different conception of arbitrariness, according to which interference is arbitrary if it is uncontrolled by those interfered with (Pettit 2012).

In contrast, if we understand freedom as non-domination, neither the person enslaved by a benevolent master, nor the wife married to a benevolent husband under patriarchy, are free, because they are both vulnerable to arbitrary interference. For Pettit, it does not suffice for being free that one is not interfered with – instead, this non-interference must be resilient, in the sense that interference must be unlikely in all nearby possible worlds (Pettit 1999, 69). In the cases of the enslaved person and the wife, for them to be free would require radical structural change, such that it ceases to be possible for the master or the husband to arbitrarily interfere in their lives. The slave master must cease to be a slave master, and the husband must cease to be invested with patriarchal power over his wife. Moreover, there must cease to be an institution of slavery, and patriarchy must be dismantled; Pettit stresses that often a person is dominated in virtue of their membership of some broader dominated class, like a gender class. For the individual to enjoy non-domination, the class as a whole must cease to be dominated (1999, 123).

It is compatible with this theory of freedom that one could be subject to interference and yet be free. Non-arbitrary interference, which tracks the interests of the person interfered with, does not undermine a person's freedom. Indeed, Pettit argues that being subject to non-arbitrary interference by the state can protect and even *enhance* citizens' freedom, by protecting them from the domination of others (1999).

The concept of domination offers a helpful lens for analysing abusive relationships: part of what is so bad about them is surely not what the abuser actually does, but what they *could* do. It also enables us to explain why ending oppression requires far more than behavioural change. In this respect, republican theory's attentiveness to the possibility of interference, rather than interference itself, is salutary. However, the theory of freedom as non-domination has a counterintuitive upshot when applied to other kinds of power asymmetric relationships.

2.b Care and domination

Consider a relationship between a parent and a child, and a romantic relationship between two adults, one of whom provides extensive physical care to the other due to a disability that severely restricts their movement.¹⁰ While there will likely be some degree of mutual care in both relationships, the amounts of care provided will nonetheless be starkly asymmetric, and one person will be much more exposed to and dependent on the other. In some

¹⁰ I will focus on relationships of care which are also intimate relationships; these two types of relationship can come apart, for example in relationships with a professional care worker.

respects, republican theory offers an intuitive analysis of these relationships. A good carer interferes regularly with the person they care for, and *pace* defenders of freedom as non-interference, we do not want to say that any such interference necessarily renders that person less free. Because interference by a good carer typically tracks the cared-for person's interests, it poses no threat to their freedom; indeed, it can be liberating.

However, caring relationships also pose a distinctive challenge for republican thinking. A good carer will only ever interfere in the other person's life in ways that track their interests; that is to say, they will never arbitrarily interfere. Yet in order for them to be able to make these non-arbitrary interventions, they need a wide-ranging set of powers – arguably, a set of powers which also involves the capacity for arbitrary interference. Marilyn Friedman articulates this worry as follows:

The capacities of people to interfere arbitrarily in the lives of others are often, if not always, also capacities to interfere nonarbitrarily for the benefit and care of those others. A capacity to benefit someone must be diverse and adaptable enough so that the person who possesses the capacity can handle an indeterminate variety of situations that may arise in caretaking. A good caretaker must be able to respond to at least some range of unpredictable contingencies with behaviour that benefits the one for whom she cares. Such capacities are essential to interpersonal relationships in which people depend on others for care, nurturance, love, and support. (2008, 253)

Being a good carer requires high levels of discretion. Discretion enables a person to interfere in ways which track someone's interests, but it also enables a person to interfere in ways which don't track their interests. I.e., the power that makes good caring possible seems to be the very same power that constitutes domination.

Consider physical care first. A person providing good physical care to someone must be able to help them with a range of physical tasks, but this ability is a double-edged sword, as Friedman notes: 'The capacity to clean someone's wound is also the capacity to infect it. The capacity to help someone climb the stairs is also the capacity to throw her down the stairs.' (2008, 54; see also Gheaus 2020). A person providing good emotional care to someone, meanwhile, must be able to communicate with them instinctively and responsively. Yet while this power enables one to provide solace, comfort, and affection, it also enables one to be cruel, dismissive and cold.

Caring relationships are highly valuable; we all need care at some point in our lives to survive and to flourish. To provide good care, carers must have

significant latitude in how they interact with the person they care for; so much latitude, in fact, that they will likely count as dominating that person. Children, it follows, are nearly always dominated by their parents, as are adults with disabilities dominated by partners who care for them.¹¹ Republican theory thus seems to entail that there is something objectionable about these very valuable relationships – an entailment many might balk at.¹²

Republican thinkers have shown some awareness of this problem.¹³ Pettit claims that his view entails that in states where children’s interests are not adequately protected in law, even good parents dominate their children (1999, 119–20). Frank Lovett writes that ‘Parents clearly possess some degree of arbitrary power over their dependent children, and so it would seem that children are under some degree of domination as I have defined it. But surely, one might suppose, the parent–child relationship is (at least in most cases) an extremely valuable one’ (2010, 145). Finally, Richard Ferejohn worries that if we try to eradicate all instances of domination, our relationships will be impoverished: ‘It is hard to see how people in a society without domination could exhibit forms of love or friendship which we seem to value’ (2001, 86). If this is what the republican project demands of us, he muses, then it ‘seems not to be a very attractive project’ (Ibid).

2.c Mutual domination

One might wonder whether the care problem applies only to asymmetric caring relationships. Couldn’t there also be domination in a relationship involving equal amounts of reciprocal care? Many republicans conceive of domination as involving not just an objectionable amount or kind of power, but also an *asymmetry* of such power (Pettit 1996, 1999; Lovett 2010;

¹¹ One might wonder whether children are the kinds of creatures that can be dominated, and thus whether they fall within the scope of republican justice at all (see Costa 2013). As Gheaus points out, whether children can be dominated depends in part on one’s understanding of arbitrary interference (2020, 751). If one subscribes to either Lovett’s procedural view (2010, 2012) or Pettit’s more recent democratic view (2012), according to which interference is arbitrary if it is either not subject to legitimate constraints which are common knowledge to all or not controlled by those interfered with, respectively, it is hard to see how children can be dominated given they cannot be involved in the development of constraints and cannot exercise sufficient control over them. Children do, however, have interests, and so the substantive understanding of arbitrariness as failing to track interests allows for the domination of children, as well as of people with cognitive impairments.

¹² I am focusing on how a caring relationship might, in one respect, be bad for the person being cared for. Caring relationships can also be bad for carers, especially when they are excessively burdensome or when the burden of care is distributed in inegalitarian ways. Friedman observes, for example, that caretaking practices are heavily gendered, and ‘have been bound up with women’s subordination (1993, 144; see also Hoagland 1990).

¹³ Republican discussions of disability are few and far between – for exceptions, see De Wispelaere and Casassas (2014), O’Shea (2018) and S  pulchre (2022).

McCammon 2015; Gädeke 2020; MacRae 2024). If this is correct, then a relationship in which partners have equal power over each other, in virtue of providing equal amounts of care to each other, cannot be dominating.

Yet Andreas Schmidt argues that a dominating relationship need not involve an asymmetry of power (2018). It is objectionable, he argues, to be dependent on another person's will, even if the person on whom you are dependent is equally dependent on you in return in the exact same way. I.e., two people can mutually dominate each other.¹⁴ If he is right, then the power problem in a dominating relationship is not a problem of asymmetry but rather a problem of either kind or of degree: there are some kinds or amounts of power one should never have over another person, regardless of whether that person has the same amount of power in return. As Schmidt puts it, 'in cases of mutual domination, the republican response should typically be to abolish or remove power rather than equalize it or intensify its reciprocal control' (2018, 189).

We should reject Schmidt's thesis for two reasons. Firstly, it is hard to see how, in a situation of equal power, each person could possess the ability to interfere *arbitrarily* with the other. In this situation there are such significant costs attached to interfering (like the possibility of retaliation) that interference cannot be arbitrary in the sense of not being forced to track the other person's interests. In the same vein, Pettit writes that if each person 'is in a position to exact something from the other in payment for the interference', then 'neither may interfere in the other's affairs with impunity' (1996, 588). If two people have equal power over each other, neither person can interfere arbitrarily with the other, and so the result is not mutual domination but rather the cancelling out of domination.

¹⁴ As an example of mutual domination, Schmidt describes a scenario in which everyone has a gun and is an excellent shot, and in which there is no law, such that murders go unpunished. Everyone has equal power in this scenario, he argues, but because everyone is dependent on everyone else's wills, everyone is dominated (2018).

Secondly, Schmidt's thesis has unacceptable implications for intimate relationships. In many intimate relationships, parties enjoy roughly equal amounts of power to interfere with each other, and such relationships seem entirely benign. Consider, for example, an egalitarian romantic relationship or friendship. Each person will have considerable power over the other, due to exposure and dependency, and the levels of power enjoyed by each could be the same.¹⁵ By Schmidt's lights, these could qualify as dominating relationships, which seems even more counter intuitive than the claim that the caring relationships we just examined are dominating. Thus, I will assume that the 'care problem', as I have presented it, is a problem only for power asymmetric intimate relationships.

3. Solutions to the care problem

The dilemma in which we find ourselves results from the intuitiveness of all of the following three propositions: care is valuable, domination is disvaluable, and care (in some cases) seems to require domination. In this section, I will consider three ways we might respond to this dilemma.

3.a Abandoning the concept of domination

Firstly, we might do away with the concept of domination entirely. I take the claim that care is valuable to be so obviously true as to be in need of no further justification. If the theory of freedom as non-domination entails that these valuable relationships can also be in at least one sense disvaluable, perhaps this is a reason to reject the theory of freedom as non-domination.

Recall that the republican conception of freedom as non-domination is to be contrasted with the traditional liberal conception of freedom as non-interference. I suggested earlier that those who subscribe to the latter account of freedom cannot explain why the person enslaved by a benevolent master is unfree, because this person is not interfered with.¹⁶ However, it may be that we can flesh out the conception of freedom as non-interference such that it

¹⁵ In a footnote, Schmidt observes that 'much of the "dependence" in romantic relationships is psychological rather than constituted by external, social power', which he thinks 'ameliorates the worry' (2018, 198, fn. 49). However, it is not clear to me why dominating power cannot be psychological.

¹⁶ Friedman proposes that we resolve the care problem by understanding domination as necessarily involving interference; 'a relationship is one of domination when, over the course of time, one party interferes arbitrarily in a substantial way with the other party and the other party does not do the same in return' (2008, 259). Technically speaking, this strategy could fall under those I discuss in §3.b, as it is an attempt to redefine domination. However, if we understand domination as a kind of interference, we have effectively erased the distinction between freedom as non-domination and freedom as non-interference.

can accommodate these paradigmatic cases of so-called ‘domination’ whilst rendering caring relationships unobjectionable.

Matt Kramer and Ian Carter refine the liberal theory of freedom in two ways. Their first move is claim that how unfree we are depends not just on how much we are actually interfered with, but also on the *probability* of our being interfered with (Carter 1999, 2008; Kramer 2003). Perhaps it could then follow that while an enslaved person has a high probability of being interfered with and is therefore not free, a child being cared for by a parent and a person reliant on their partner for physical care generally both enjoy a low probability of being interfered with and hence are free.

What, however, a person enslaved by a master who is so steadfastly benevolent that they seem extremely unlikely to interfere – surely we do not want to say that they are free? Kramer and Carter’s second move is to claim that a person’s freedom consists of their enjoyment not just of a wide range of options, but also of a wide range of combinations of compossible actions. As Kramer puts it, their freedom is determined by ‘the range of the combinations of conjunctively exercisable opportunities’ available to them (2008, 34). The person enslaved by a benevolent master may be free to do lots of things, but the range of combined options available to her is still significantly curtailed compared with that of a non-enslaved person. She can go for a walk when she likes for example, but she can’t go for a walk without being polite and submissive to her master. In this respect she is much less free than a non-enslaved person, who enjoys the additional option of being able to go for a walk without being deferential to anyone.

It is possible that a person who is cared for might find their options constrained in this way, too. Even though a child, for example, will rarely need to be as deferential or ingratiating as an enslaved person, especially in a good caring relationship, her options are nonetheless curtailed in some ways as a result of the relationship she stands in with her carer. The child knows that there are certain activities she cannot do unless she also asks for permission, for example – she lacks the option of doing the activity without asking for permission. Yet it may be that by virtue of being in the caring relationship, the child has more options than she would otherwise have had – having a good parent may in fact expand the range of options available to her. Likewise, whilst the person cared for by his partner may find some option combinations circumscribed, a greater range of options may become available to him as a result of having a carer in the first place. On balance, then, we might say that these caring relationships do not reduce the (liberal) freedom of the persons cared for.

However, if we follow this logic, it may turn out that the person enslaved by a benevolent master is sometimes more free than a non-enslaved person, too. While such a person may not be able to perform certain combinations of actions as a result of the master-slave relationship, she may enjoy a variety of new options/option combinations on account of her master's benevolence – he might bestow her with financial resources that create new possibilities for her, for example. And yet, surely, she is still less free than a non-enslaved person with otherwise similar options – she is, after all, enslaved! Thus the conception of freedom on the table does not deliver the right result. The distinctive advantage of understanding freedom as non-domination is that it enables us to capture an objectionable kind of vulnerability experienced by this enslaved person, which is not attenuated by the expansion of choices available to her. Liberal conceptions of freedom, however refined, fail to capture this, and in some cases deliver counterintuitive analyses. We should not, therefore abandon the concept of domination.

3.b Changing the concept of domination

While I hope to have shown that domination, understood as vulnerability to arbitrary interference, is a concept worth keeping, this is compatible with its being a concept in need of some refinement. And, so, another way we might try to resolve the care problem for domination is by tweaking our definition of domination.

I will consider two possible modifications: perhaps we should understand domination as necessarily having a social or structural component, and/or perhaps we should understand domination as having only instrumental disvalue. Such modifications might help resolve our puzzle in the following ways: maybe we can establish that caring relationships lack the necessary structural features to qualify as dominating, or maybe we can establish that even if they do involve domination, this is not necessarily bad and therefore is not in tension with their being valuable, qua caring relationships.

I have been following Pettit in thinking of domination as two-way relation between agents or groups of agents. It follows from this that it is possible for one person to dominate another entirely behind closed doors, without the knowledge or support of anyone else; a parent could dominate their child even if the two of them were the only people on Earth. However, Dorothea Gädeke and Cecile Laborde have both argued that domination has an essential social component and cannot occur in a social vacuum.

Gädeke argues that the power to interfere arbitrarily with someone's choices is only dominating when it is 'structurally constituted'; 'Domination is more specific than merely being exposed to any random capacities to interfere; it refers to structurally constituted forms of power that establish an asymmetry in standing' (Forthcoming). The dominator is necessarily enabled by a set of social and legal supports, which establish them as socially superior to the dominated person and contribute to their ability to interfere with impunity in the dominated person's choices.

Similarly, Laborde observes that 'few real human beings, in the actual and nearby worlds, can rely on their sheer personal strength to subject others to their will. To get their way, they crucially depend on the collaboration, active or passive, of others' (2024, 31–32). According to her definition of domination, the discretionary power of the dominator must be attributable, at least in part, to their being socially empowered.

Thinking of domination in this way may enable us to grant that caring relationships are not necessarily dominating, at least if the dependence relations involved are not reflective of or scaffolded by oppressive social hierarchies. It also entails that the two relationships we are focusing on probably do involve domination, but only contingently, because of the social backdrop against which they usually occur. Gädeke writes, for example, that ableism 'puts disabled persons in a disempowered position by casting the perspective of those characterized as 'able' as the normal perspective from which to shape and assess relations of care—thereby placing the caregiver into an uncontrolled, structurally constituted position of power' (Forthcoming). The person cared for by her partner is dominated partly in virtue of the society in which she lives and how people with disabilities are treated within it. Similarly, the domination of parents by children is made possible by the general social disempowerment of children.

It is certainly important to acknowledge the social dimensions of many cases of domination. Embracing this understanding of domination could also allow us to solve the care problem by showing that while caring relationships are essentially valuable, the form they take in our non-ideal society can be contingently objectionable; with adequate social change, they can cease to be so.

However, we can acknowledge that many paradigmatic cases of domination are socially scaffolded whilst also allowing for cases of domination which occur in relative isolation. Note in the passage above that Laborde writes that '*few* real human beings, in the actual and nearby worlds, can rely on their sheer personal strength to subject others to their will' (2024, 31–32, my italics). A parent, it seems, *can* rely on their sheer personal strength to subject a child to their will, given that child's near complete defencelessness. This will be the case however robust our social and legal systems of child

protection. A person who cares for her partner, similarly, will inevitably enjoy enough discretionary power over that person to significantly harm them, however robust legal protections for people with disabilities may be. Vulnerability to arbitrary interference by others is socially scaffolded, but it need not be. We should not, therefore, redefine domination such that the dominator is necessarily socially empowered.

Another way we might redefine domination is by denying that it is necessarily bad. Perhaps domination is only bad in some cases, when it has harmful effects on those dominated. Lovett floats (but does not endorse) such a possibility: ‘There is the question of whether “benevolent domination” – as for example might exist between a parent and a child – counts as a genuine instance of domination or not’ (2001, 99).¹⁷

As noted above, it is beneficial for children for their parents to have considerable discretionary power over them. So too is it beneficial for one partner to have discretionary power over the other in order to provide them with physical care. Indeed, both might be better off in these relationships than in any other possible relationship. Perhaps we can say that in such cases, there is domination, but it is not disvaluable – domination is unobjectionable when it serves the interests of those dominated. If this is right, then the care problem seems to dissolve. As Lovett puts it:

Since loving parents presumably wield arbitrary power over their children in their children's interests, this and similar cases would be handily excluded by definition, and the claim that we always have a reason to reduce domination so defined could be retained. (2010, 145)

Recall that we have been working with an account of domination as vulnerability to arbitrary interference, where interference is arbitrary if it is not forced to track the interests of the person interfered with (this is different from Lovett’s procedural understanding of arbitrariness). Benevolent domination, then, would be vulnerability to interference which is not forced to track one’s interests, where that vulnerability is in one’s interests. Non-benevolent domination would in turn be vulnerability to interference which is not forced to track one’s interests, which is not in one’s interests.

My main concern here is that domination itself is not in the cared-for person’s interests; rather, it is in their interests to be in the kind of relationship that domination seems to make possible. That is to say, vulnerability to arbitrary interference is an enabling condition of something that is in their interests, but not itself in their interests. As Lovett points out, if we were given the choice between two relationships, one which facilitated all the goods of caring

¹⁷ See also Wartenberg (1990).

relationships without domination, and one which facilitated all the goods of caring relationships with domination, we would surely prefer the former (2010, 146). He is right to claim that ‘we always have a prima facie reason to reduce domination if we can’, and this is true even though there are some cases where reducing domination would be unacceptably costly.

3.c Biting the bullet

A third strategy available to us is simply to bite the bullet. We can – and, I propose, should – grant that all of the following are true: care is valuable, domination is disvaluable, and care (in some cases) seems to require domination. However, this is an easier bullet to bite when we grant that non-domination is simply one good among many, to be traded off against other important goods.

There are two ways we could think about the republican commitment to non-domination. Firstly, we might think that non-domination is the central human good and takes priority over all other goods. If this is right, then if we find ourselves deciding between the goods of caring relationships and the good of non-domination, we should always choose the latter. This seems to entail that we should avoid forming caring relationships which involve domination and try to eliminate such relationships which already exist. This is, clearly, a bad way to go. Foreswearing caring relationships is both impossible and profoundly undesirable. Of course, it is possible that humans could cease reproducing, in which case parent-child relationships in particular would eventually cease to exist, but asymmetric human dependencies of all other kinds will remain – all humans will age, for example, and most will require physical and emotional care.

A better way of thinking about the republican commitment to non-domination is to grant that while non-domination is a good, it is one among many. This pluralism about value is endorsed by Lovett (2010) and Gheaus (2020). For Lovett, the care problem simply demonstrates ‘the need to make trade-offs among competing goods’ (2010, 146). Both grant that in some cases, other goods should take precedence over non-domination. Gheaus writes:

Child-rearing without domination would require the elimination of the possibility to use, with impunity, power over children in ways that do not track their interests – a goal that is unattainable without the sacrifice of other, more important (non-republican) goals: children’s general interest in adequate care, including their shared interest in intimacy. (2020, 756)

Similarly, Lovett allows that the benefits of discretionary power for parents ‘outweigh the costs in terms of the child’s being subject to some degree of domination’ (2010, 146). While both focus on parent-child relationships, the point generalises for all caring relationships. If one partner’s ability to provide good care for the other requires them to dominate that person, we may decide that the value of the care trumps the value of non-domination.

To be clear, this strategy is distinct from the ‘benevolent domination’ idea sketched above. Saying that in some cases we should accept domination if it enables other goods is not the same as saying that sometimes domination is unobjectionable. It is still bad in and of itself, but an inescapable bad, and a bad whose elimination in some contexts would simply be too costly.

Accepting that some degree of domination is inevitable in caring relationships does not license us to wash our hands of the care problem. This claim is quite compatible with the claim that many caring relationships currently involve far too much domination and require radical overhaul. Indeed, in the context of parent-child relationships, Gheaus contends that ‘More than any other theory of legitimate power, republicanism requires a profound reform of child-rearing’ (2020, 749). I will finish, therefore, by sketching some reforms which might reduce domination in caring relationships.

4. Mitigating domination

One way of attenuating domination in caring relationships is the introduction of greater regulation. Legal and social measures can be deployed to raise the costs of certain kinds of arbitrary interference and thereby prevent caregivers from exercising powers in ways which do not advance the interests of the people cared for. For example, we might follow Gheaus in thinking that parents ought not to be able to prevent their children from receiving beneficial medical treatments, like vaccinations, or to compromise their child’s bodily integrity for the parent’s own religious or aesthetic values (2020; forthcoming). To achieve this, we might make such forms of interference illegal until the child can consent. We might also explore ways of giving children more of a say over how and by whom they are parented, for example by giving them a greater voice in the family court system. Similarly, we should pursue greater legal protections for people with disabilities, which could involve the implementation of supported decision-making frameworks, rather than traditional guardianship models.

Regulatory change must be introduced carefully; attenuating the dominating dimension of caring relationships too much will eventually imperil the goods of such relationships. Moreover, the more heavy-handed institutional

regulation becomes, the greater the risk of creating a new kind of domination by the state itself.

A second way of attenuating domination in caring relationships is by bringing about what Gheaus calls a ‘proliferation of care’ (2020; forthcoming). She argues that one way of reducing the domination of children is to dismantle what she calls ‘monopolies of care’, which make children entirely dependent on one or two all-powerful parental figures. If we make sources of power over children both diverse and separate, children will experience less dependence on any given person. This can be achieved by dismantling social expectations that children are parented only by their biological parents, as well as through legal changes. Gheaus herself proposes, for example, mandatory state childcare, as well as the availability of secular godparents (Ibid). Such measures, she suggests, ‘could ensure that no child’s care is overly controlled by one individual or a group of closely related individuals’, and would ‘lower, as much as possible, the practical and psychological costs that children have to pay in order to (temporarily) exit relationships that involve inadequate care, and to seek remedies for less significant abuses of power’ (2020, 16).

As for proliferating care for adults with care needs, we should aim for the involvement of multiple carers in a person’s life, and ensure the availability of several different providers of care for anyone who needs it, which would require a robust social care system. We should also support everyone in pursuing multiple *intimate* relationships, which would require enabling full social participation for people with disabilities so they have opportunities to form such relationships. This might involve the provision of, among other things, accessible social spaces, support with movement and travel, and assistive communication technology.

The foregoing discussion might also make us question certain romantic norms. For example, some romantic partners expect each other to meet all of their needs and forbid each other from forging intimate relations of any kind with other people. A greater openness to a plurality of caring, intimate relationships (romantic or otherwise), beyond a primary romantic partnership, could mitigate against the objectionable forms of dependence which can arise in such relationships.

Conclusion

Intimate relationships provide us with all manner of important goods and contribute to our flourishing in important ways. This is in part due to the distinctive kinds of exposure and dependency that occur within them. Yet when one person is more exposed to, or more dependent on, another, as for

example in a parent-child relationship or a romantic relationship in which one partner provides physical care for another, one partner will find herself with the disproportionate ability not only to benefit the other greatly, but also to harm or wrong her greatly. Thus, while there is much to celebrate in such a relationship, there is at least one sense in which the relationship is objectionable, because one person is dominated by another.

I call this the ‘care problem’. I have shown that there are several ways we might respond to it. We might simply do away with domination as a concept, but doing so entails losing the ability to capture a worrying form of vulnerability. We might tinker with the definition of domination itself, to try to exclude caring relationships, but doing so risks undermining the concept’s explanatory power. Or we might simply bite the bullet and truly take to heart Pettit’s claim that ‘domination is a fact of life’ (1996, 604). Sometimes, good intimate relationships are also dominating relationships, and while we can and should work hard to minimise domination as much as possible, it seems an inevitable consequence of the human condition that with great intimacy can come great vulnerability.

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