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Autonomy and Gendering in Childhood

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Abstract

Supporting the development of children’s autonomy is widely recognized as a fundamental good. Despite this, social practices that reflect and reinforce patriarchal gender norms are ubiquitous. These norms, however, curtail the development and exercise of children’s autonomy by constraining their opportunities along gendered lines and promoting falsehoods about “natural” identity expression. In recognition of these limitations, many parents across the political spectrum are pushing back against patriarchal gender norms in their parenting approaches. One particular model that aims to fully embrace a progressive parenting methodology is the “gender-open” model of parenting (GOP). Broadly, the GOP methodology involves withholding disclosure of a child’s biological sex as assigned at birth from public knowledge. With the necessary support, this approach aims to encourage children to choose their own gender in their own time. Advocates of this model claim that adopting the GOP ensures a child’s autonomy in self-expression. But despite these claims, none of the advocates clearly articulates how the model promotes children’s autonomy. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate how the GOP protects and promotes children’s autonomy in robust ways, making a strong case for its adoption.

Keywords: childhood, gender, identity, autonomy, agency, parenting

1. Introduction

Supporting the development of children’s autonomy is widely recognized as a fundamental good. Despite this being the case, social practices that reflect and reinforce patriarchal gender norms are ubiquitous; they are deeply embedded and reflected in our societal conventions, codified in our legal frameworks, and perpetuated through a process of inculcation that begins even before a child’s birth. These norms, however, curtail the development and exercise of children’s autonomy by constraining children’s opportunities along gendered lines, and by promoting falsehoods about “natural” identity expression.

In recognition of some of these limitations, many parents are pushing back in varying degrees against patriarchal gender norms in the ways that they raise their children (Rees and Saguy 2024). One model of parenting in particular that aims to fully

embrace a progressive methodology is “gender-open” parenting (GOP). In broad strokes, the GOP methodology involves withholding the disclosure of a child's biological sex as assigned at birth from public knowledge and, with the necessary supports, aims to encourage children to “choose their own gender in their own time” (Rahilly 2022, 264). Elizabeth Rahilly (2022, 277) claims that, in doing so, parents “work to protect their kids’ gender self-determination” and that “not only does this ensure the child’s autonomy in self-expression, it also leaves open the possibility that the child may never claim a fixed gender at all.”

This model of parenting, and versions thereof, have been gaining popularity among many progressive parents.¹ As one GOP parent, Kate, remarks “Well, duh, that’s how you raise a kid!” And another parent says, “I think it pretty much immediately made sense. It was almost like, that was the answer I didn’t know existed to some question I had, which was, how to resolve gender, how to treat it as a parent” (Rahilly 2022, 269). Some commentators, however—including those who fall in the more progressive camp—have expressed reservations about adopting the model, citing concerns that pushing back against the patriarchal status quo to this degree puts children in danger of backlash and violence (Friedman and Green 2013, 16).² Other, more conservative perspectives argue also against this model on a range of grounds, including the claim that the GOP somehow “goes against human nature.” Dr. Eugene Beresin, director of training in child and adolescent psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, for example, claimed that the GOP is a dangerous psychological experiment: “To raise a child not as a boy or a girl is creating, in some sense, a freak” (ABC News 2011). Parents who have adopted the model, such as Canadian parents Kathy Witterick and David Stocker, have also been criticized as poor, reckless parents engaging in a “damaging social experiment” (Witterick 2013, 46).

Supporting children’s autonomy is, as I have said, a widely recognized fundamental good, and a duty that most recognize that parents have to their children.³ If a model of parenting did protect and promote children’s autonomy, this would provide a strong *prima facie* reason in its favor—one that may outweigh the risks associated with rebuking the status quo and even potentially generate a moral obligation for its implementation. Despite advocates of the GOP arguing that this model promotes children’s autonomy, however, none clearly articulate how the model does so. This is problematic as it leaves arguments in its favor based on

¹ This model is also part of what Jake Pyne (2014,1) refers to as a boarder “paradigm shift” in approaches to raising gender nonconforming children.

² Anecdotally, this was also a common attitude expressed in conversation with academic and nonacademic parents alike.

³ See, for example, Hannan (2019, 112), Feinberg (1980) Clayton (2006), Mullin (2014), and Bou-Habib and Olsaretti (2014).

autonomy severely lacking and, I contend, does a disservice to the robust ways in which the GOP can in fact promote and protect children’s autonomy, in childhood and for the future adults that they will become.

My aim in this paper, then, is to show how the GOP protects and promotes children’s autonomy in these robust ways. To begin, I give a brief overview of how children are typically inculcated into hegemonic patriarchal gender norms, as well as how such norms have limiting and harmful consequences for children and adults. I then give an overview of GOP methodology and articulate how this methodology protects and promotes autonomy in childhood and adulthood.

2. Parenting for the Patriarchy

Since at least the second wave of the 1960s and ’70s, many feminists, academics and others have recognized patriarchal gender norms as problematic. From a feminist perspective, they are problematic, among other reasons, because they reflect a fraught ideology that prioritizes and reinforces the power of men in society over others (especially women) based on outdated “facts” about natural biology that result in real-world limitations, inequalities, and harm.

Despite these long-acknowledged harms, there is a wealth of evidence that patriarchal gender norms, and parenting practices that encourage them, remain prevalent—even by those who explicitly disavow them (Kane 2012, 11). Gender-reveal parties exemplifying gender-stereotypical iconography, for example, are commonplace in many communities. In hospitals, babies assigned “male” gender at birth continue to be wrapped in blue, and those assigned “female” are wrapped in pink. Clothing and toy companies still advertise and successfully sell clothes “for boys” and “for girls” in ways that reflect stereotypical norms (“Daddy’s little princess,” “Mummy’s little superhero”). Schools, bathrooms, children’s sports, and other curricular activities also continue to be segregated along gendered lines. The list goes on.

There is also a wealth of evidence that patriarchal gender norms remain not only prevalent but also harmful and limiting for persons of all genders throughout life resulting in inequality and violence. Today, for example, girls are still expected to perform a disproportionate amount of unpaid care and domestic duties compared to boys.⁴ When they grow up, they will continue to have access to fewer positions of power than men because “people still tend to perceive women as less effective at leadership” (Brescoll 2016). Boys in schools are still more likely to be shamed for showing emotion and will often face harsher punishments than girls (Connell 2000, 158). And while bearing the benefits of the patriarchal dividend, men will be 3.5 times

⁴ According to UNICEF, girls perform 160 million more hours daily across the globe (Busch 2024).

more likely to commit suicide than women—a likelihood associated with men’s reluctance to seek mental health care due to hegemonic gender norms promoting stoicism and independence (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. 2019). Nonbinary children and those who are part of the LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more) community also continue to face routine discrimination and violence for not conforming to hegemonic gender norms. In 2022, 540 antitrans bills were introduced across the United States aiming to ban trans adults and children from using bathrooms, engaging in sports, and having legal documentation (e.g., birth certificates and passports) that accord with their gender identity, as well as having access to gender-affirming care (Reed 2023). Transgender youth are also significantly more likely to experience violence, bullying, and discrimination than cis-gendered youth.⁵ And this continues into adulthood. A Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2023) report found that 500 gender identity-motivated hate crimes were recorded in the United States in 2022 alone.

The factors that lead to inequality and violence are, of course, multifaceted and intersectional. Patriarchal gender norms are only one part of a wider oppressive arrangement that privileges men over women, white people over people of color, able-bodied people over disabled people, the ruling class over the working class, young over old, and heterosexuality over any other form of sexuality. The cause of the disparity among genders and those that fall outside of the cis-het binary, then, is not singular, nor is it solely an issue of gender. Patriarchal gender norms and parenting in ways that reinforce them, do, however, play a key role in the disparity, as well as in the maintenance of the wider oppressive social arrangement.

3. Parenting Trends: Pushing Back against Patriarchal Norms

In recognition of the harms and limitations that patriarchal gender norms support, many parents, as I have said, are modifying how they are raising their children. In Mallory Rees and Abigail Saguy’s (2024, 7) study on parental attitudes with respect to gender, for example, they found that both right-wing and progressive parents claimed to endorse the view that “we should avoid gender stereotyping when raising children.” For conservatives, this included tolerating children’s cross-gendered toy play (e.g., girls playing with traditionally coded “boy’s toys”) and allowing girls to pursue traditionally male-dominated pursuits. Conservative parents, however, “were unlikely to speak of encouraging children, especially boys, to resist gender stereotypes” and sometimes actively rejecting it: “No, a boy can’t wear a dress” (Rees and Saguy 2024, 7–8). For progressives, pushing back against patriarchal norms included intentionally seeking to “create a lot of space in terms of [gendered]

⁵ See, for example, Ryan and Rivers (2003), Clark et al. (2014), Earnshaw et al. (2016), and Sares-Jäske et al. (2023).

options,” letting children “choose which [options] they’re into” and “following the child’s lead” as to their own gender identity and expression (Rees and Saguy 2024, 9).

Parenting models that push back against patriarchal gender norms or offer more expansive models of gender are not new. Many non-Western cultures have long-established gender-inclusive traditions, exemplified by the recognition of nonbinary identities such as the hijra in South Asia and the *irawhiti* among the Māori. Even within Western cultures, parents have been pushing back against patriarchal norms since at least the second-wave feminist movement, with the introduction of gender-neutral parenting, and continue to do so especially within queer and other progressive communities.

The gender-open model of parenting (GOP) is one relatively new approach that fully embraces a progressive parenting methodology. What makes this method new, at least within Western communities, is that unlike many parenting approaches, the GOP does not assign a gender to a child from birth. Rather, it aims to create space and provide resources for children to determine their own gender in their own time.

3.1. The Gender-Open Model of Parenting

Like many socially embedded practices, there is no one way to practice the GOP, but there are three methods that are common to many approaches. They are nondisclosure, the cultivation of gender-inclusive environments, and direct and adjacent education.

Nondisclosure: Many parents practicing the GOP adopt a practice of nondisclosure of a child’s assigned biological sex at birth. By rejecting the practice of disclosure, parents aim to interrupt the process of gender anticipation. Gender anticipation is the disposition one adopts with respect to a future child, and it includes the assumptions and expectations about a future child’s attributes and behaviors, as well as the kinds of relationships parents and others hope to form with the future child based on the child’s assigned sex (Kane 2012, 31). These expectations typically begin before birth with assigned sex disclosure, and they continue to shape how a child is treated and what is expected of them in childhood and throughout their life. By interrupting this process, GOP parents aim to provide their child space to determine and announce their own gender in their own time. Alex Morris (2018) describes one parent of a child raised on the gender-open model as believing that “if no one knew her child’s sex, then no one could treat the baby like a boy or a girl, molding that child to fit into the stereotypes.”

Cultivation of Environments: The second method of the GOP is to cultivate and select for environments that are conducive to freedom of gender expression. Many social environments are arranged in ways that reflect a patriarchal and stereotypical binary through colors, iconography, and other forms of segregation (e.g., children’s birthday parties, clothing and toy stores, bathrooms, etc.). GOP parents aim to raise

their children “in an environment where colors and objects and activities are not slotted into the arbitrary and binary categories of ‘girl’ and ‘boy,’ and the concepts of ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ are not set up in opposition to each other” (Morris 2018). To do so, parents aim to provide children with a range of options without tying them to gender (“for boys,” “for girls”), so that children can try out a range of options to see what resonates with them independent of stereotypical gendered expectations. In addition to cultivating their own spaces, parents also actively seek out other supportive environments, including education and medical institutions, and supportive social communities.

Education: The third method of many GOP parents is to engage in direct education—of their children and those who interact with their children—on gender theory and the gender-open model of parenting. Some parents refer to this activity as cultivating “gender literacy” (Pyne 2013, 200). Here, parents aim to emphasize the existence of a variety of gendered identities that persons can choose from independently of their biology and the socially idealized forms of masculinity and femininity. As one mother describes, “Instead of teaching [our child] that boys have penises and girls have vaginas, we just say *most* boys have penises and *most* girls have vaginas, and so that teaches [them] a general pattern while allowing for exceptions” (Pyne 2013, 201). Rahilly (2022, 274) recounts another parent, Dani, describing encouraging gender literacy by holding “run-of-the-mill ‘coffee-table conversation’ in their household,” which they described “as ‘5000-level gender deconstruction theory, just for fun,’ where they/them pronouns are a naturalized part of the lexicon.”

The purpose of direct education is to better inform children about the nature of gender within the context of social norms and about the nature of social norms themselves—to understand in particular that gender expectations are social norms, and that social norms are constructed, can be deconstructed, and are the kinds of things that change and evolve over time; rather than, for example, being immutable facts stemming from biology. In doing so, parents hope that their children, and the adults they become, will be better able to navigate their own gender expression and the gender expression of others in ways that are well informed and autonomous.

This final method is not adopted by all GOP parents. Some parents actively avoid the education method over concerns about placing too much significance on gender as a concept or providing children with grounds for stereotype threat—that is, the distress one feels about the risk of conforming to stereotypes about their social group. Some parents—both progressive and conservative—are also concerned that education about the nature of gender norms may encourage a devaluation of those activities and preferences traditionally seen as feminine (caring roles, the color pink, open emotional expression, etc.). These may be valid concerns. But education, as I will come to demonstrate shortly, is considered to be pivotal to the development and exercise of autonomy. If autonomy is itself a fundamental good, then the benefits of

education may outweigh the risks. Moreover, if an aim of the GOP is to advance feminist aims of dismantling the harms of patriarchal ideology and making space for autonomous expression, there is reason to think that providing and cultivating supportive environments and engaging in nondisclosure will not be enough to achieve this aim. The hijra within South Asia, for example, while illustrative of expansive gender roles, are situated within a largely patriarchal society where traditional roles for men and women are still enforced.⁶ If the harms of patriarchal ideology are to be addressed, and spaces made more conducive to children’s autonomy, this would suggest then that education that supports gender literacy and opposes patriarchal ideology should be part of the GOP approach.

4. The Gender-Open Model of Parenting and Autonomy

While advocates of the GOP aim to push back against the harms and limitations supported by patriarchal ideology, they do not claim that the GOP can address all or even most of them. What advocates of this model do claim, however, is that the GOP can protect and promote children’s autonomy—specifically their gender self-determination and autonomy in self-expression (Rahilly 2022, 277). Some advocates also argue that the GOP can make children better autonomous citizens insofar as they are better informed about the nature of social norms and diverse ways of being and are more practiced at “thinking for themselves,” rather than submitting unquestioningly to the status quo and to authority (Witterick 2013, 26).

Despite advocates appealing to autonomy, none clearly articulate how the GOP achieves these ends. This may not be an issue if it were the case that the nature of autonomy and those conditions that support it were obvious or intuitive. Unfortunately, however, this is far from the case. My aim now is to outline two broad accounts of autonomy that are widely endorsed within the philosophical literature: end-state theories and gradualist theories. I focus on concepts in the philosophical literature because this literature provides rich conceptual terrain from which to anchor the discussion. After I have articulated end-state theories and gradualist theories, I will show how the GOP protects and promotes both forms of autonomy in robust ways.

4.1. Kinds of Autonomy: Gradualist and End-State Perspectives

The concept of autonomy is one of the most widely discussed and contested concepts within moral and political philosophical literature. As such, there are many proposed variations with different constitutional, procedural, and normative requirements. Across the varying accounts there are two predominant categories that many accounts of autonomy broadly align with. They are “end-state” accounts of

⁶ Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

autonomy and “gradualist” accounts of autonomy. End-state accounts cast autonomy as an end-state to be achieved. Gradualist accounts, on the other hand, cast autonomy as something that is acquired gradually—often with persons achieving different kinds of autonomy over time or across different domains with experience and guidance.

A number of end-state theories follow in the Kantian tradition requiring agents to cultivate and act from what Christine Korsgaard (2009, 22–24) refers to as an “established practical identity.” An established practical identity is a conception of the self that is coherent and sustained over time and reflects what we consider to be ineliminable aspects of ourselves. According to Marina Oshana (2005, 84), for example, “Being autonomous requires first and foremost that a person have the capacity and the disposition to know her will and know which of her beliefs, desires, affective states, relationships, and so on are distinctive of and essential to her self-conception.” On such accounts of autonomy, an established practical identity is the evaluative framework from which a person issues authoritative autonomous decisions.⁷

In addition to an established practical identity, many end-state theorists hold that in order to be autonomous, persons require sufficiently developed cognitive maturity, developed capacities for critical reflection to reason well with respect to their decisions and actions and, in some cases, to form and act in ways that cohere with their own practical identities.⁸

It is important to note for purposes here that a number of end-state views exclude children, and especially young children, from the domain of autonomy. This is because many children typically do not have well-developed or stable views of who they are as a practical identity calls for. As Samantha Brennan (2002, 61) aptly describes, “The child who loves skating today may hate it tomorrow; the child who will only wear purple today will tomorrow only wear pink.” Moreover, many children have not yet developed sufficient executive functioning to evaluate higher-order beliefs, desires, and the like from which to then act on, nor experience from which to form an established practical identity (Levinson 1999; Ross 1998). These limitations are relevant for considering the merits of the GOP with respect to autonomy because advocates of the GOP are typically concerned, at least in part, with the protection and promotion of children’s autonomy *as children*, and not only for the adults that they become. If, however, children cannot be autonomous in childhood then this argument in its favor will be false.

⁷ This view is also held by Tamar Schapiro (1999), and the absence of a practical identity is cited as a reason why children cannot be considered autonomous.

⁸ See, for example Feinberg (1980), Levinson (1999), Ross (1998), Schapiro (1999) and Oshana (2005).

In contrast to the views of end-state theorists, gradualist accounts of autonomy often hold that children can have autonomy—or, more precisely, particular *kinds* of autonomy—in childhood. Amy Mullin (2019, 231), for example, argues that while there are many contested accounts of autonomy in the literature, different conceptions share a common core idea: that “autonomy involves self-governance in accordance with personally meaningful goals and commitments.” It is Mullin’s view that when children act in ways that are reflective of their “volitional self,” they *are* self-governing and so are acting autonomously. A volitional self is “the part of the self that seeks to govern its own actions to accord with what it values, cares about, wants to accomplish” (Mullin 2007, 537). Unlike an established practical identity, the features that constitute a volitional self need not be subject to or the product of critical reflection. As Mullin explains, what we care most about can be revealed to us in a number of ways that do not require higher-order critical reflection, such as direct emotional experience. Children, Mullin explains, do care a great deal about some things, and they do so in a way that renders them features of their volitional self. In particular, children have the capacity to stably love others and, by the age of three, can typically engage sufficient impulse control to manage goals (of care, for example) with respect to those that they love.

Mullin refers to the kind of autonomy that she claims children can have as “local autonomy rather than “global autonomy.” Local autonomy refers to autonomy in action, in the particular choices and actions that one makes from day to day. Global autonomy is “a trait characterizing a substantial period of one’s life and all significant domains within it” (Mullin 2019, 231). It is Mullin’s view that while children typically do not have global autonomy due to developmental limitations, even young children can have local autonomy in some areas.⁹

Robert Noggle (2002) also offers another gradualist perspective arguing that while children often lack *full* autonomy, children—especially in adolescence—often do have agentic capacities that rival some autonomous adults. It is Noggle’s view that most children lack full autonomy, however, because they do not have a sufficiently developed moral agency that he takes to be constitutive of fully fledged autonomy. To reach full autonomy—and eschew parents’ right to paternalism—children need both capacities for self-governing means-end reasoning and a sufficiently developed moral framework from which to guide one’s actions.

In addition to end-state and gradualist perspectives, many theorists (including Mullin and me) endorse a hybrid view where end-state and gradualist perspectives

⁹ A similar gradualist perspective is also endorsed by Paul Bou-Habib and Serena Olsaretti (2014, 27) who claim that “even fairly young children . . . possess some degree of autonomy, understood as the effective ability to act in line with one’s commitments.”

are both taken to be integral parts of the “autonomous journey,” where one begins to gradually exercise local autonomy in some domains, which eventually reach global levels as an (albeit evolving) end-state.

For the purposes of this paper, determining which side to fall on with respect to the gradualist/end-state/hybrid divide is not necessary. This is because, as I will aim to show now, whichever perspective one does take, there is good reason to think that the GOP can protect and promote children’s autonomy—both for the children they are now and for the future adults that they will become as end-state autonomous agents.

4.2. Protecting and Promoting Autonomy

There are at least three fundamental ways in which the GOP better protects and promotes autonomy than conservative approaches to parenting, all of which are relevant for a gradualist and end-state perspective. The first is by providing children with knowledge to facilitate successful means-end reasoning. The second is by providing space and resources to explore valuable ends. And the third is by modeling moral integrity as a key component of autonomy.

4.2.1. Supporting Means-End Reasoning

Both gradualist and end-state forms of autonomy engage in means-end reasoning as constitutive requirements of autonomy. In the case of Mullin’s local volitional account, for example, it is basic reasoning to achieve one’s goals with respect to the things one cares about. On end-state views it is often to pursue one’s higher-order goals or to act in ways that reflect one’s personal commitments. In order for means-end reasoning to be successful—insofar as success is to achieve one’s ends—persons require knowledge about the ends that they are aiming to achieve.¹⁰ Of course, not all knowledge promotes autonomy—sometimes, in fact, too much knowledge can hinder decision-making insofar as it may overwhelm the decision maker, or it may be irrelevant to the decisions a person needs to make. The nature of gender and the nature of social norms themselves, however, are fundamental to the way the social world is arranged, and often play a key role in how persons navigate the world and conceive of themselves. As such, knowledge about social norms is paramount. The first way that the GOP supports autonomy then is by providing children, and the adults that they will become, with accurate and pertinent information about the world—specifically, that is, about gender (including gender variation) and social norms to facilitate successful means-end reasoning.

¹⁰ Similarly, Linda Zagzebski (2004) argues that accurate information, or knowledge, is required to effectively exercise one’s autonomy and to act well with respect to the things one cares about.

Many parents, including conservative parents, also teach their children about traditional gender norms so that children understand “how they fit into society,” which they take to be an important element in “setting their kids up for success” (Rees and Saguy 2024, 623). This knowledge may also promote children’s autonomy because if children know what is expected of them, this knowledge can be used to inform means-end reasoning for success. There are, however, important distinctions between this approach and the GOP’s approach to knowledge that makes the GOP’s methodology with respect to knowledge and autonomy favorable. First, the conservative approach, and approaches that take the status quo for granted, for example, teach children what society generally expects from them given their assigned sex, how to conform to those expectations, and takes conforming as a natural given in descriptive and prescriptive senses (e.g., “This is just what girls/boys like”; “This is what girls/boys *should* like”). The GOP on the other hand, if done in the spirit of a “5000-level gender deconstruction” class, as Rahilly described, will teach children what society expects of them given their assigned sex, *and* it will also teach children the history and malleability of these expectations, as well as the alternative ways of being and expressing their gender.

These differences make the GOP’s methodology with respect to knowledge and autonomy the more favorable approach in at least two ways: first, because it provides children with both more and more accurate information about gender, and second, because it better meets the negative moral duties parents have with respect to their children’s autonomy. If we follow Bou-Habib and Olsaretti (2014, 30), among the moral duties parents have to their children is the duty not to deceive or mislead: “In so far as a child already has the capacity to understand x, it is wrong to deceive [them] about the facts and mislead them about [x].” According to this view parents should also “provide children with the information and the explanations which children are capable of understanding and appreciating” and should not instill in them beliefs that they are too young to understand the reasons for (Bou-Habib and Olsaretti 2014, 30). To do otherwise, according to Bou-Habib and Olsaretti, is to fail to respect the autonomous capacities of children. Many conservative parents and parents who accept the status quo will not intentionally mislead their children. But for many children with the capacity to understand gender and gender norms, the conservative approach that teaches or takes gender-essentialism for granted will be a misrepresentation of fact and so is misleading. As Emily Kane (2012, 14) explains, while “certainly a number of fundamental biological variations are linked to physiology and reproductive capacities . . . the extent and manner of their importance to the social understanding of gender have varied over time and place in ways that are inconsistent with the claim that biology completely determines biological outcomes. Against a range of natural variation among individuals, social discourse constructs only two distinct and internally homogeneous categories.” So, while all

approaches may provide children with valuable information to support their autonomy, only the GOP does so in a way that does not simultaneously limit children's autonomy by misleading children regarding the true nature of gender.

Rather than explicitly or implicitly endorsing patriarchal norms as facts about the world, some conservative parents may take a different approach. They may, for example, present patriarchal norms as ideals to strive toward—perhaps as a matter of taste. These parents will not mislead their children about facts about the world, thereby compromising their means-end reasoning. They will, however, still compromise their children's autonomy in ways that I will describe below. There is also reason to think that such parents also fail other parental duties that they have toward their children. Many theorists argue that there can be good reasons to allow parents to impart their own values onto their children. Noggle (2002, 113), for example, argues that “in order to progress from merely biological, impulse-driven, simple agency, and to develop genuinely human reflective moral agency, the child must develop a value system that encompasses more than just biological drives” and that “since there is no getting around the need for *some* initial set of values, we might just as well let the parents instill theirs, at least within certain limits.” Importantly, however, parents cannot impart just any collection of values onto their children. As Noggle (2002, 114) claims, “Nothing gives the parent any right to give [their] child a morally indecent value system or world-view.” The rationale, Noggle (2002, 115) says, “for letting parents offer children their own beliefs and values does not apply to unreasonable, intolerant, and morally indecent value systems or world-views. Beliefs and values of that sort hinder one's participation in the moral community of a diverse, pluralistic society: from the point of view of the child's own interests and the interests of the moral community, such values and beliefs are pernicious.” Moreover, Noggle (2002, 115) says, “Nothing gives the parent a right to make the child closed-minded with regard to other value systems or world-views, or to try to make her unable to reflect upon her own as she grows into a full-fledged moral agent.” Patriarchal norms, whether understood as facts about the world or ideals to strive for, perpetuate harmful forms of gender inequality and reinforce other systems of oppression. As such, they are at odds with a respectful moral community. Insofar as parents have moral obligations to their children not to impose such worldviews, doing otherwise fails that duty.

4.2.2. Supporting Space Creation

Let's return now to autonomy. In addition to supporting children's autonomy by teaching children about the nature of social norms, gender, and alternative ways of being and expressing their gender, the GOP also provides children with the space and resources for the exploration of their own identity and ends; spaces where children are permitted to “try on” ways of being. According to end-state accounts that

situates the creation of one's own practical identity as constitutive of autonomy, this feature of the model is fundamental. Tamar Schapiro (1999, 732) refers to this kind of exploration as “play” and says that it is “a strategy—perhaps *the* strategy—for working through the predicament of childhood” to full autonomy. By engaging in play, Schapiro (1999, 732) claims that children more or less deliberately “try on” selves to be and worlds to be in. It is her view that, in doing so, children “become themselves,” where that eventually becomes an authoritative self. Part of what seems important to the process of open exploration, however, is that, in trying on selves, children do not just feel what it is like to speak with authority as a “self,” as Schapiro suggests. Rather it seems to be that children also experience and figure out what resonates with them, and that gives content to their identity. In creating space and resources to try on ways of being, then, the GOP also helps children to cultivate their own practical identities.

Another way in which space and resources for exploration supports end-state accounts is by keeping children's futures open. Joel Feinberg (1980) and Matthew Clayton (2006), for example, argue that the development of children's agentic capacities must be supported so that they “reach maturity with as many open options, opportunities and advantages as possible” (Feinberg 1980, 130) to maximize chances for the child's self-fulfillment.¹¹ At this stage, in adulthood, persons should be able to exercise the autonomy they now have to choose for themselves among ends—ends that have been kept open by those who have the duty to keep children's autonomy rights in trust. The GOP keeps possible futures open then, insofar as it presents children with space to explore and later realize a wider collection of possible ways of being and possible futures.¹²

¹¹ Feinberg's position with respect to open futures has been criticized for being overly demanding, specifically with respect to requiring “as many open options, opportunities and advantages as possible” (Lotz 2006, 539; quoting Feinberg 1980, 130). Clayton's (2006, 90) own position is that there should be only “an adequate range of options from which to choose from.”

¹² Interestingly, the open futures argument has been used by others, such as Jorgensen, Athéa, and Masson (2024), to argue *against* gender-affirming care for transgender children. One reason that Jorgensen, Athéa, and Masson (2024, 1945) appeal to is the “cascading process” of gender-affirming care. They explain that “in medicine, the term ‘cascade’ refers to a process whereby an initiating factor is followed by a stepwise series of events that proceed with increasing momentum to a seemingly inevitable conclusion” (1945). Cascading is problematic on their view, in part, because it makes discontinuation challenging and so closes children's future “options, opportunities and advantages” in problematic ways. If Jorgensen et al. are correct, the GOP may work to mitigate this harm by providing children with more

From a gradualist perspective, exploratory spaces and resources are also valuable because they allow children to try on and discover what is valuable to them as children, and to similarly pursue ends that resonate with them. According to Mullin, children have autonomy when they have goals that matter to them and can pursue those goals. Mullin does not discuss the importance of *how* children come to value the ends that they do, but there is good reason to think that a child's autonomy is supported when the ends that they come to value are ends of their own; ends that they have, for example, tried and endorsed, rather than those they come to hold through forces such as direct control, coercion, or misdirection. If this is correct, then the creation of space and the provision of resources also supports autonomy in childhood.

Children brought up in conservative environments, and even in more progressive environments that do not adopt the GOP, also most certainly engage in play and will try on ways of being as Schapiro describes. The primary difference here seems to turn on the breadth of options and justification for restrictions. In conservative environments that restrict the toys children are allowed to play with, limit what they can wear, and promote a patriarchal ideology—either as representative of facts about the world or as personal ideals—for example, children will only be able to “try on” a restricted set of ways of being. In some sense all children will be presented with a restricted set of options due to economic limitations, environment, and the availability of other resources. So, restriction itself is not a unique or obvious problem. What is problematic, however, is if the restrictions are *unjustified*. Restrictions may be unjustified for a host of reasons. Restrictions placed on children may be unjustified if, for example, they are based on false beliefs or problematic ideals. If a child is not permitted gender-diverse toys because they are considered “unnatural,” for example, this restriction would be unjustified. Restrictions placed on the ends children can pursue may also be unjustified if those restrictions hamper children's autonomy in ways that are not justified by “a larger good connected to a child's well[-]being” (Mullin 2014, 419). Merely restricting a child's access to gender-diverse toys and forms of expression simply because it is the preference of the parent, for example, would not be a larger good to justify restricting the child's autonomy. The best choice in terms of promoting a child's well-being will vary across children given their individual circumstances and disposition. But it is far

space to explore their own gender identity so that they and their families can make more informed decisions when pursuing gender-affirming care. Of course, this will not entirely remove the worry that requires structural attention to promote children's autonomy as children and as the adults that they will become. What is not obvious is that limiting gender-affirming care achieves this aim.

from clear that restricting a child's exploration and autonomy in these ways could be in the best interest of a child in most cases. There is also ample evidence that reinforcing patriarchal gender norms is harmful for children—and especially for gender nonconforming children who find themselves in unsupportive environments. As Teresa Surace et al. (2021, 1147) explain, rates of depression, isolation, suicidal ideation, and self-harm are higher in gender nonconforming children. These harms, however, are not ended by forced conformity and restricted options. Rather it is support and a rejection of stigma that support children's well-being. Here then, too, the GOP seems to be the favorable model, not just for autonomy but also for well-being.

4.2.3. Supporting Moral Agency

As I described earlier, some theorists such as Noggle hold that fully fledged autonomy requires moral agency or "moral autonomy." On Noggle's (2002, 102) view, "a moral agent . . . has what we might call moral autonomy, for she has the capacity to transcend mere desire and act according to prudence and to personal and moral values." Carolyn McLeod (2005, 110) also calls this kind of moral autonomy "integrity," which she describes as being "self-governing in a way that reflects one's own moral commitments." Parents who adopt the GOP often do so because they believe that patriarchal gender norms are harmful and so take action to stand up for those values by refusing, to the extent that it is possible, to impose those norms onto their children. In doing so, parents push back against the status quo and display a strong commitment to their own moral autonomy, and they also model that commitment for their children. In addition, parents often model great courage. As Cheshire Calhoun (1995, 259) describes,

The courageous provide spectacular displays of integrity by withstanding social incredulity, ostracism, contempt, and physical assault when most of us would be inclined to give in, compromise, or retreat into silence. Social circumstances that erect powerful deterrents to speaking and acting on one's own best judgment undermine the possibilities for deliberating about what is worth doing. We thus have reason to be thankful when persons of integrity refuse to be cowed.

When one's values align with the GOP and one engages in this model of parenting, then they demonstrate to children how to act with integrity. Insofar as integrity is a feature of fully formed autonomy, this is yet another way that the model protects and promotes children's autonomy. In addition, given the social conditions under which integrity is enacted, parents also model courage. This demonstrates to

children not only how to exercise autonomy but how to do so in the face of challenge, which is valuable for children as children and into adulthood. Parent's actions also fight for space for children to do so insofar as they push back against forces that undermine those capacities needed to exercise autonomy: deliberating about what is worth doing, what kind of life one wants to have, what one does and can care about, and what one can conceive of as possible.

More conservative models of parenting may also model integrity insofar as they reflect parental values. So far, I have referred to "conservative parents" broadly. There are, however, many forms of conservative parenting with respect to gender. Some parents, for example, may endorse gender-conservatism in ways that are reflective of the status quo. Others may endorse a more radical form of gender-conservatism (e.g., "tradwives").¹³ When parents endorse gender-conservatism in ways that are reflective of the status quo, they will not model courage against the status quo in a way that makes space for children to be more free to pursue their own ends with respect to gender. Status quo conservative parents, of course, may model courage in other domains. Given how important gender is to identity formation, however, modeling courage (or a lack thereof) will be significant in terms of promoting and protecting children's autonomy. When parents endorse gender-conservatism in ways that are not reflective of the status quo, like the GOP, they may also model courage for their children in ways that challenge widely endorsed gender practices—albeit in the opposite direction of the GOP. This courage, however, will include courage to *oppress*. If we think that moral courage is incompatible with oppressive value systems, as I think we should, then even conservative parents who model courage will fail to model moral courage.

5. A Moral Obligation to Adopt the GOP?

At the beginning of this paper, I claimed that if a model of parenting did protect and promote children's autonomy, this would provide a strong *prima facie* reason in its favor—even potentially a moral duty on behalf of parents. When determining which moral duties parents have to their children, there are many factors to consider, with autonomy being but one, albeit very important, factor in that determination. What I have hoped to show here is that the GOP does in fact protect and promote children's autonomy in fundamental ways that provide good reason to take this model of parenting seriously. Whether or not this is sufficient to generate a moral obligation in parents, at least under some conditions, is an important question that needs addressing. There are also many other important questions remaining, including what moral obligations other persons and institutions, such as schools and medical services, have with respect to promoting children's gender autonomy.

¹³ On tradwives, see Proctor (2022) and Love (2020).

Unfortunately, I do not have the space to do such questions justice here. In what remains, my aim is not to settle these questions. Instead, I present one important objection to the GOP that I refer to as the “futility objection.” I also consider three reasons for thinking that parents are not morally obligated under *all* conditions to adopt the GOP. Those reasons pertain to considerations of privilege, violence, and parental autonomy.

5.1. The Futility Objection

When considering if there is a parental obligation to adopt the GOP, one must keep in mind that children typically declare their preferred gender at three to four years of age (Mayo Clinic. 2022). As soon as a child declares their own preferred gender, they will very likely be subject to the same kind of gendered expectations that are initiated with earlier gender disclosure and anticipation. These gender expectations work to undermine parental efforts at protection insofar as they are communicative to children, and as they signal to others how to respond to children in patriarchal ways. Moreover, it is unlikely that, even during this short window, nondisclosure could shelter a child from the influence of patriarchal ideology. Even with supportive environments, parents cannot fully control for other’s behavior, nor for the systemic messages that are pervasive and, to an extent, unavoidable within Western culture. Parents also cannot shelter their children from the fact that parents are also products of a society based on patriarchal ideology—situated within, influenced by, and produced from the same gendered environment. As such, even more progressive parents—parents who “sincerely believe that boys and girls deserve to be free to develop their own interests and to become rounded individuals”—often at the same time “channel and craft their children’s ‘gender performances’” to conform with hegemonic gender ideology (Fine 2010, 204). Given these limitations, where then, one might ask, really lies the value of the GOP for autonomy? And how could parents have a moral obligation to comply with a model of parenting when the proposed goods do not really seem possible to deliver on?

The conditions under which parents are raising children are indeed nonideal. The very obstacles that the gender-open model seeks to challenge are themselves challenges to the efficacy of the model; challenges to the status quo are, of course, challenged by the power of the status quo. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the aim of those adopting the GOP is not an unrealistic, unfettered freedom from patriarchal ideology—although this is the ideal. Rather, it is a project of education and space-creation. Parents aim to create gender-open supportive spaces with resources and conversation that support a more gender-inclusive and accurate worldview. Nondisclosure, while not sheltering children from patriarchal ideology, is an important part of that education and an important part of the project of undermining misdirection. Nondisclosure is, in some ways, a strong “embodied” commitment to

an education about gender norms and social norms more widely—teaching that one can reject pervasive social practice and the status quo, that one does not have to conform to dominant ideals, and that other ways of engaging socially and as a gendered being are possible. These practices aim at undermining misdirection and direct control, promote autonomy, and are valuable in these terms, even if their achievement is met with limitations. They are also, as I argued above, expressions of parental integrity and courage that model for children the virtues necessary for autonomy. A project of creating a childhood unfettered by the constraints of patriarchy would be, at least in current times, mostly futile. A project creating a childhood that promotes gender-inclusivity, education, integrity, and autonomy in the way the GOP aims, however, is not.

5.2. The Argument from Privilege

While adoption of the GOP is not futile in the ways described above, there is still good reason to think that some parents are not morally obligated to adopt the GOP under all conditions. The first of those reasons pertains to considerations of privilege. To support a child's autonomy in the ways the GOP prescribes requires a collection of resources and opportunities. Parents, for example, require a sufficiently liberal education—where this includes an appreciation for the nature of patriarchal gender norms, as well as wider social norms and structures of power—to impart that knowledge onto their children. Parents also require time and resources to share that knowledge and to have access to communities that support that education and provide safe space for gender-exploration. Access to these resources and opportunities, however, often comes at a premium cost and constitutes a significant privilege—a privilege that is unavailable to many, and especially to those who already occupy marginalized social positions.¹⁴ The ability to adopt the GOP then is *itself* a significant privilege inaccessible to many. If the moral obligations one has are those obligations that one can meet, then it will necessarily be the case that some parents are not obligated to adopt the GOP.

5.3. The Argument from Violence

The second reason for thinking that some parents may not be obligated to adopt the GOP pertains to considerations of violence. As Witterick (2013, 26–27) aptly explains, “We live in a society that sees the expression of difference as ‘going too far’ and responds punitively or—too often—with violence. Even by preschool, peers express ‘distinctly cooler responses’ to children who play in ‘gender-inappropriate ways.’” Furthermore, she explains, there is also “a one-in-ten risk of abuse

¹⁴ As Morris (2018) explains, “When it comes to preschool and day care, many of the most progressive places are also the most expensive.”

‘perpetrated by parents or other adults in the home’ . . . against children expressing themselves outside what is expected from their biological sex” as well as “a ‘lasting impact on health’ associated with the elevated risk for Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS) in nonconformers” (Witterick 2013, 27; quoting Roberts et al. 2012, and Findlay 2012). Witterick’s (2013, 27) response, and one that mirrors many GOP parents, is to highlight that while conforming to traditional gender-norms may protect a child from non-conforming-based violence, “conformity to the gender binary will not protect them” from patriarchal gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence and gender nonconforming violence both occur at high rates in patriarchal societies and are, as explained earlier, compounded by factors such as race and class. Rates of risk will vary depending on one’s particular circumstances, including the climate of one’s community—be it supportive, intolerant, or so forth.¹⁵ We typically think that parents have a moral duty not only to promote their children’s autonomy but also to protect them from violence. If the threat of violence is so great then, even with the agentic benefits of the GOP, this threat may be sufficient reason not to adopt the GOP—at least with respect to the elements of public display that may put one’s child at an intolerable risk of harm. Importantly, like all decisions that pertain to the autonomy and well-being of children—especially when compromises need to be made—this decision should be made carefully. When making this decision, it is also important to note that many harms that children face as nonconformers are those associated with a lack of support. As explained earlier, rates of depression, isolation, suicidal ideation, and self-harm are higher in gender nonconforming children (Surace et al. 2021). These harms, however—as we have seen throughout history with the disasters of “conversion therapies”—are not ended by forced conformity and restricted options. It is for this reason that Surace et al. (2021, 1147) call for “educational interventions directed to parents, teachers, mental health professionals and general community . . . to struggle against stigma and social isolation,” rather than forced conformity and restricted options.

5.4. The Argument from Parental Autonomy

One final reason for thinking that parents may not be morally obligated to adopt the GOP pertains to parental autonomy. As I claimed earlier, many theorists argue that there can be good reasons to allow parents to impart their own values to their children. One reason, as articulated by Noggle, is that it provides children with a value framework to move from simple agency to reflective moral agency. Other reasons cited include claims that shared values can promote familial bonds and can

¹⁵ For gender-based violence rates in Australia, see, for example, Campbell et al. (2024). For violence against LGBTQI+ in Australia, see Hill et al. (2020).

be an important mode of sustaining cultural heritage.¹⁶ I also explained, however, that if we follow Noggle (2002, 115), parents are not morally justified in imparting values to their child that are “unreasonable, intolerant, and morally indecent value systems or world-views.” Given that patriarchal norms perpetuate harmful forms of gender inequality and reinforce other systems of oppression, I argued that parents have a moral obligation to their children not to impart such world views.

The GOP, however, is not the only model of parenting that aims to reject patriarchal norms and ideology. Some parents, for example, will raise their children as “boys” or “girls” (insofar as they declare a child’s assigned sex at birth) but will also provide their children with education on the nature of gender norms and support gender expansive exploration. Parents may even model such exploration for their children in their own expression. Many people who have not been raised according to the GOP (including, presumably, many feminist and GOP-practicing parents) have come to have a robust appreciation for the nature of gender norms, their flexibility, and the need for social change. So, while imparting intolerant beliefs and values onto one’s children—like those reflected in patriarchal ideology—is impermissible, there are arguably other permissible ways to raise children, including ways that reject patriarchal ideology and embrace an expanded conception of gender that does not entail adopting the GOP. Given that this is the case, one might think that it is both reasonable and permissible for parents to exercise discretion with respect to the model that they adopt and the value they place on nondisclosure within the limits of decency.

While I am sympathetic to this view, whether this is indeed the case warrants further discussion pertaining to the value of alternative models of parenting for children’s autonomy and other important goods—particularly if we think that a base limit of decency does not capture all there is to say about morally permissible methods of parenting. There also needs to be further discussion about the extent of parental obligations with respect to children’s autonomy (is it, for example, a maximizing duty, or a threshold duty?), how the promotion of a child’s autonomy should be weighed against other valuable goods, and what duties other individuals, groups, and institutions have to children with respect to their autonomy that may impact the scope of parental duties. These are all complex questions that are worth pursuing if we want to promote methods of parenting that give adequate respect to children’s agency as well as other morally valuable goods.

¹⁶ For arguments in favor of these values, see Noggle (2002, 113), Brighouse and Swift (2014), and Galston (2011).

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