

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Thinking freedom relationally: Life projects and care as an ethical orientation for International Studies

Maggie FitzGerald 

Department of Political Studies, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada  
Email: [maggie.fitzgerald@usask.ca](mailto:maggie.fitzgerald@usask.ca)

(Received 23 October 2023; revised 26 March 2024; accepted 27 May 2024)

## Abstract

The field of International Studies has often been concerned with either negative conceptualisations of freedom and liberty (i.e. freedom from obstacles and interference) or positive notions of freedom (i.e. the possibility to act and develop). Further, these two notions of freedom have been conceived of as rival and incompatible. Drawing upon Simone de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity (1947), this article rejects such a binary conceptualisation of freedom and instead puts forward a relational understanding of freedom. This article also begins to sketch the possibilities offered by such an understanding of freedom via a nascent dialogue between this relational freedom and the ethics of care. Specifically, it is posited that care and freedom weave together to form the very ethical space and conditions in and through which it becomes possible to pursue various life projects in the first place. Care and freedom, it is suggested, may thus provide one orientation for studying and practising international relations in a manner that moves towards building, amending, and maintaining relations that better support everyone (where this, crucially, also entails the ending of relations which oppress, harm, and cause suffering).

**Keywords:** care; ethics; freedom; relationality

## Introduction

One of the most interesting features of the recent surge of research on relationality in the field of International Studies<sup>1</sup> is that the very concept of relations has been revealed to be contested and contestable. As Amaya Querejazu astutely observes, 'nothing is more political than claims about existence.'<sup>2</sup> This can be understood in a double sense. First, the very conceptualisation of relations (the ontological status of relations themselves) is political in that it is a key part of enacting a world: it delineates what is thinkable and speakable, what counts as countable in the first place. Second, but relatedly, claims about which relations exist and matter do not 'circulate' evenly; they are alternatively made visible or ignored, often in ways that reproduce power relations and the knowledge hierarchies that shape our world today. For instance, 'earth-beings'<sup>3</sup> or 'more-than-human beings'

<sup>1</sup> While there has undoubtedly been an increasing interest in relations in the field – so much so that it has been argued that we are undergoing a 'relational turn' (Astrid H. M. Nordin, Graham M. Smith, Raoul Bunskoek, et al. 'Towards global relational theorizing: A dialogue between Sinophone and Anglophone scholarship on relationalism', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:5 (2019), pp. 570–81) – it is worth emphasising that there are several traditions in international studies that have long foregrounded the importance of relations, including various strands of feminist, decolonial, post-colonial, and critical race scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> Amaya Querejazu, 'Cosmopraxis: Relational methods for a pluriversal IR', *Review of International Studies*, 48:5 (2022), pp. 875–90 (p. 875).

<sup>3</sup> Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

have only recently been made ‘visible’ to those in/of the modern world, which has generally dismissed non-human agency and thereby marginalised a variety of relations and relational entities that are significant in different sets of practices. Beings like Gyack (the northern corroboree frog), who is an active participant in the annual ceremonies of the Wolgalu/Wiradjuri peoples,<sup>4</sup> the mountain Ausangate, who is an agential being in Quechua life;<sup>5</sup> and bahluts, which are a source of power or potencies for the Yshiro people,<sup>6</sup> are different forms of beings that have been unknowable to (i.e. outside the ontological possibilities of) the modern world<sup>7</sup> until quite recently. Yet these beings, and the relations they hold, are co-constitutive of the worlds of different groups, demanding notice and invoking various responsibilities, and therein shaping political processes and decisions – they are of political import.

Significantly, those of us who aim to work in the relational tradition – a tradition which inherently critiques the totalising project of modernity and Western science, both of which divide the world into autonomous and independent units – are not outside of these relations of power. Zoe Todd demonstrates this well in her critique of ‘the ontological turn’ in anthropological literature, which, similar to the ‘relational turn’<sup>8</sup> in International Studies, prioritises ontological multiplicity, or the idea that instead of living in a universe we live in a pluriverse,<sup>9</sup> a world of many worlds.<sup>10</sup> While pluriversal scholarship aims to foreground multiplicity, Todd argues that this work can, in fact, erase different Indigenous voices and contribute to the ongoing colonial erasure of Indigenous knowledges.<sup>11</sup> Which claims are heard, which claims circulate, and the connections (relations) we make between and across different relational claims are political and can often reproduce relations that marginalise certain groups, knowings, and beings.

At the same time, scholars like Vanessa Watts foreground that for many Indigenous ontologies, the primacy of relations means that knowledge (including claims about what exists) is intimately tied to place/space/time, the relations in and through which it emerges.<sup>12</sup> Thus, knowledge cannot be abstracted or detached from those relations and places. When those of the modern world make connections with such other knowledges (even if our intent is well meaning and aims to learn from/with these knowledges in a generative way), Watts warns that there is a perpetual danger that in so doing, these knowledges and practices will be subsumed or radically reconfigured by the modern world. While it is possible to reduce this risk by undertaking the work of immersing ourselves in relations/worlds elsewhere so that we can together develop a shared grammar and capacity for meaningful connection across claims (and to be certain, some scholars are doing such work),<sup>13</sup> it is crucial to emphasise that there are many obstacles to undertaking this

<sup>4</sup>Lisa Slater, ‘Learning to stand with Gyack: A practice of thinking with non-innocent care’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 36:108 (2021), pp. 1–12.

<sup>5</sup>De la Cadena, *Earth Beings*.

<sup>6</sup>Mario Blaser, ‘The threat of the Yrmo: The political ontology of a sustainable hunting program’, *American Anthropologist*, 111:1 (2009), pp. 10–20.

<sup>7</sup>I would suggest that these beings are still ‘unknowable’ to those who do not have such relations – although they may be contemplatable from a relational standpoint (e.g., I can understand these beings are/come-into-being in relation to others, even though I do not know these beings as I do not have such a relation myself). Thus, starting with relations makes the very idea of ‘knowability’ richer, deeper, and more nuanced – a matter of degrees of relationality, perhaps, as opposed to a finite project.

<sup>8</sup>Nordin et al., ‘Towards global relational theorizing’.

<sup>9</sup>See Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

<sup>10</sup>Zoe Todd, ‘An Indigenous feminist’s take on the ontological turn: “Ontology” is just another word for colonialism’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29:1 (2016), pp. 4–22.

<sup>11</sup>For work on the erasure of Indigenous thought in international relations, see Hayden King, ‘Discourses of conquest and resistance: International relations and Anishinaabe diplomacy’, in Randolph B. Persaud and Alina Sajed (eds), *Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations: Postcolonial Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 135–54.

<sup>12</sup>Vanessa Watts, ‘Indigenous place-thought and agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!)’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2:1 (2013), pp. 20–34.

<sup>13</sup>See Tamara Trownsell, ‘Recrafting ontology’, *Review of International Studies*, 48:5 (2022), pp. 801–20.

kind of project, including time, resources, and permissions from those we seek to be in-relation with (or in-better-relation with).<sup>14</sup>

Gina Starblanket and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesik Stark outline additional difficulties related to relationality when they warn that we must 'be mindful of the ways in which relationality can either advance or constrain political movements'.<sup>15</sup> To illustrate, Starblanket and Stark explain that in some situations, relationality – while offering a powerful lens to critique Western politics – limits and constrains Indigenous women's voices (dismissing them as relational and therefore part of the 'private sphere'), while also positioning Indigenous women as responsible for repairing and maintaining relationships, including relationships that may be harmful to them in the first place (e.g. relations of violence). It also absolves men from having to do difficult relational work; the onus is placed on 'Indigenous women to address and remedy unhealthy relationships and violence within Indigenous and settler contexts while also ensuring the maintenance of traditional practices'.<sup>16</sup> Without glossing over the very important differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women's experiences and oppressions (not to mention the ways in which colonial relations have reorganised gender relations within Indigenous communities with consequences that were, and are, oppressive to Indigenous women),<sup>17</sup> feminist scholars have also argued that relational paradigms and discourses have been, and can be, mobilised to the detriment of women and others who are made responsible for caring for relations, including ones that may be violent or oppressive.<sup>18</sup> Simply put, rendering certain groups of people 'more' responsible for relationship building and maintenance can constitute its own harm. As Starblanket and Stark beautifully summarise, relationality 'can be invoked to either confront or insulate the violation of individual and collective well-being'.<sup>19</sup> As such, we must strive to 'elucidate its dual potential to function as either empowering or restrictive when invoked in various contexts'.<sup>20</sup>

In sum, then, a key challenge for relational scholarship in International Studies pertains to how to navigate the tension of forging new relations in and across our existing relations (which may, even often will, entail changing other relations) without extracting relations (practices, knowledges, ethics) in a way that is appropriative and harmful, and without reproducing or reinforcing the very relations of power that we may hope to disrupt. Also tied to this tension is the question of whether maintaining certain relations or building new ones is desirable at all; as Claire Colebrook writes, 'decolonisation might, [for instance], offer something other than a mutation of relations and instead open the thought of a cut in relationality'.<sup>21</sup> This article, in many ways, is motivated by these critical interventions, which caution against the wholesale valorisation of relations by foregrounding that distinguishing which relations we want to nurture and care for from those which we may wish to refuse or end is a task of great importance for the field of International Studies.

To this end, this article hypothesises that freedom can provide an important criterion for helping us with this difficult work of determining which relations we want to live in and with, and which

<sup>14</sup>I do not mean 'permission' in a liberal legal consent way but rather wish to point out that we cannot assume that others necessarily wish to forge such a project of knowledge-sharing or relation-building/amending with us in the first place. Indeed, as I hope to make clear below, freedom is crucially important in part because of this very point: subjects need to be free so that they can refuse to take up shared projects if they so desire.

<sup>15</sup>Gina Starblanket and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesik Stark, 'Towards a relational paradigm: Four points of consideration', in Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (eds), *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous–Settler Relations and Earth Teachings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), pp. 175–207 (p. 177).

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>See, for example, Bontia Lawrence, 'Gender, race, and the regulation of Native identity in Canada and the United States: An overview', *Hypatia*, 18:2 (2003), pp. 3–31.

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Claudia Card, 'Caring and evil', *Hypatia*, 5:1 (1996), pp. 101–8.

<sup>19</sup>Starblanket and Stark, 'Towards a relational paradigm', p. 177.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Claire Colebrook, 'A cut in relationality: Art at the end of the world', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 24:3 (2019), pp. 175–95 (p. 186).

ones we do not. The goal of this argument, more concretely, is to commence the work of exploring this idea by considering what freedom might look like if one begins from the premise that, instead of autonomous and independent actors (à la the liberal tradition), we are deeply relational and heterogeneous beings, constituted, ‘all the way down’, in and by our relations to particular others and broader social-political-economic contexts. Ultimately, the argument is that freedom can assist us in addressing the concerns outlined above, but this must be a relational freedom. The central aim of this article is thus to put forward one possible understanding of relational freedom, drawing upon Simone de Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity.<sup>22</sup> In this way, this argument contributes more generally to ongoing work on relationality in the field of International Studies by offering a relational notion of freedom.

Further, to explicate why developing relational notions of freedom is important, I also begin to connect this freedom to the issues highlighted above, particularly by focusing on the relationship between freedom and care. I argue that freedom and care, as presented here, can provide a framework from which to think through and assess our attempts at building (care) relations across (care) relations. In order to truly build collective life projects, or to constitute a ‘global’ in which harm is minimised, care is prioritized, and injustices are remedied, everyone must be free to pursue their own project, to project themselves through their freedom, and then to freely work with others (or challenge others) in this work. A framework of freedom and care foregrounds that the care relations or life projects that will be found to be meaningful to all involved can be revealed only if all involved are free to assess, critique, and take up such relations. While this framework is only partially developed here and opens up sites for future research (as opposed to providing definitive closures), my hope is that this can serve as one starting point for tending to the dangers that are present in the uncritical valorisation of relations.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I present my own theoretical starting point and positionality and further elucidate the problem introduced above. In so doing, I aim to be explicit about the ways in which I have already taken ‘a profession of faith’ (to borrow Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui’s term, especially as presented by Marcos Scauso)<sup>23</sup> by starting this argument from certain theoretical and political assumptions, which I do not mean to be transcendental and settled, but which rather serve as necessary but always revisable points of departure that orient and motivate my thinking here. Next, I turn to Beauvoir’s discussion of freedom and illustrate how she offers a conceptualisation of freedom that is relational all the way down. This relational understanding of freedom is valuable for International Studies as it provides a way to think about freedom that is untethered from the individual liberal subject; it thereby contributes to the task of rethinking concepts and tools from a relational ontology more generally. Lastly, I conclude my argument by beginning to point to some possibilities that a relational freedom offers by sketching the contours of how the notion of freedom developed here can interweave with care to provide an orientation for undertaking the work of considering which relations we want to nurture, which ones we want to reshape, and which ones we might wish to sever all together. More simply, I contend that relational praxis (by which I mean, the co-constitutive and transformative work of knowledges and practices that may build better relations across relations) in International Studies cannot proceed meaningfully without conditions of freedom, where freedom is understood relationally. As highlighted in the concluding section, my aim is for this preliminary discussion to invite and stimulate further conversations on how freedom can be in dialogue with other grammars and concepts (in this case, I work with a notion of care, but there are many possibilities) as we continue critical scholarship on relationality in International Studies.

<sup>22</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Open Road Media, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch’ixinakax Utxiwa: On Decolonising Practices and Discourses* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020); Marcos Scauso, *Intersectional Decoloniality: Reimagining International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

## Problem and positionality

As someone whose work falls in the relational tradition (relational International Studies more broadly, and the ethics of care, which is premised on a relational ontology, in global ethics in particular), I have become increasingly concerned with how to navigate the possibilities and tensions outlined in the previous section in my own research programme. That is, much of my work has largely focused on how those in the modern world can live well with other worlds.<sup>24</sup> I have drawn significantly on a critical, feminist ethics of care when contemplating this question. So as to be clear about my own theoretical commitments, and given that, as noted above, claims about relations (the nature of relations, the types of relations that exist) are contested and political, a word about my own use of the term ‘relationality’ is merited here.

Drawing upon a critical, feminist ethics of care, and particularly following Fiona Robinson,<sup>25</sup> relationality, for the sake of this argument, is understood as a claim about our social ontology: subjects are relational beings, constituted in and by the relations they find themselves in.<sup>26</sup> These relations range from the interpersonal to broader social, political, and economic relations and, importantly, those relations that comprise the material world (i.e. what the modern world has broadly called ‘nature’ constitutes subjects as well). It is necessary to emphasise that this point of departure is an ontological claim, which Kimberly Hutchings defines as ‘a claim about the nature of the world we inhabit rather than a claim about what ought to be the case.’<sup>27</sup> While this understanding of care ethics departs from a relational ontology, which sees relations as the practices and connections that constitute subjectivities and (alternatively) sustain or harm material bodies, this is not the same as asserting that all relations are a priori normatively desirable, i.e. always generative and caring. For this reason, this article takes seriously critiques of relational scholarship, like those offered by Ignasi Torrent<sup>28</sup> and Claire Colebrook,<sup>29</sup> that interrogate the idea that ‘being in relation is morally good’ as such, or that problematise the claim that it is desirable to move toward some totalising relational whole. A relational ontology does not uncritically value relations; it instead demands an ongoing examination of which relations are to be valued and upheld and which are to be refused in particular contexts.

From this care-ethical understanding of relationality, it can be argued that worlds, as collective relations and practices, need to be enacted, and crucially, re-enacted: they need to be cared for and maintained. At the same time, there are worlds or particular sets of relations and practices that we will not want to live in and with – practices that harm, oppress, marginalise, or exploit, for example – and these relations will need to be changed or perhaps abolished altogether. Given that

<sup>24</sup> Maggie FitzGerald, *Care and the Pluriverse: Rethinking Global Ethics* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Fiona Robinson, *The Ethics of Care: A Feminist Approach to Human Security* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> While this article focuses on this particular understanding of relationality, this is not to deny other relations and relationalities. Relations comprise other sites as well: for example, conversations (see Karin M. Fierke and Vivienne Jabri, ‘Global conservations: Relationality, embodiment and power’, *Global Constitutionalism*, 8:3 [2019], pp. 506–35); medical practices (see Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003]); the global political economy (see Kimberly Chang, and L. H. M. Ling, ‘Globalisation and its intimate other: Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong’, in Marianne Marchand and Anne Runyan (eds), *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances*, 2nd ed. [New York: Routledge, 2011], pp. 27–43); cosmologies (see Querejazu, ‘*Cosmopraxis*’); and stories (see Watts, ‘Indigenous place-thought and agency’) are relational – and are in relation with relational subjects. Instead, for purposes of scope and to attend to the problem at hand, this argument focuses on a specific site of relations: the relational subject. This includes human subjects, but also more-than-human beings, who emerge in relation to different human collectivities.

<sup>27</sup> Kimberly Hutchings, ‘Towards a feminist international ethics’, *Review of International Studies*, 26 (2000), pp. 111–30 (p. 123).

<sup>28</sup> Ignasi Torrent, ‘Problematizing entanglement fetishism in IR: On the possibility of being without being in relation’, *Review of International Studies* (2023), pp. 1–15.

<sup>29</sup> Colebrook, ‘A cut in relationality: Art at the end of the world’. I sincerely thank one of the reviewers for introducing me to these two articles, which succinctly articulate an issue that I have been attempting to think through in a grammar that had been previously unfamiliar to me.

relations of power have shaped, and continue to shape, different worlds and lived experiences, there are many relations that at least some of us do not want to sustain. This is, again, a key part of my starting point here: I am normatively concerned with the relations of power that have created, and continue to sustain, hierarchies across social groups, and I am interested in considering how relational praxis can undo these relations. It is likely that in several cases ending/severing/disrupting/refusing these harmful relations is, in fact, caring; the line between violence and care is not necessarily clear cut when contemplating the destruction of harmful relations.<sup>30</sup>

But, as alluded to in the introduction, this is not an easy terrain to navigate. Given that worlds (sets of relations) can sometimes be inaccessible to those not in/of those relations (at least, not accessible in some fulsome sense, as they cannot be extracted from the relations in which they emerge, as just argued), judging which practices we want to live in and with is difficult and messy business, especially when various relations of power create moral and epistemic hierarchies.<sup>31</sup> In a relational ontology, there is (can be) no universal way to adjudicate amongst different practices and relations, nor are there universal authoritative standards for forming moral judgements.<sup>32</sup> Yet global hierarchies of power often privilege certain moral standpoints as neutral and universal (e.g. moral rationalism) and thus ‘smuggle[...] in unexamined moral hierarchies that shut down other voices.’<sup>33</sup> Those from certain worlds (I think most often of those worlds that occupy privileged positions in global hierarchies of power) come alternatively to judge or appropriate the relations, practices, and knowledges of other worlds in problematic and careless ways, often resulting in further damage. They may also insist on building or maintaining relations that others do not want to live in and with.

This raises a series of questions that speak directly to the problem just described: how can we move towards building connections that are less appropriative (understanding that this might, of course, entail not attempting to build certain connections at all)? How do we build solidarity without extracting or violating the worlds/knowledges/beings of those we seek to work with? More broadly, how can we work towards cultivating relations in which we want to live? How do we know which relations to care for? How do we know which relations to sever? Surely there will be some relations that we<sup>34</sup> do not want to live in/with – or that some of us do not want to live in/with. How can we begin to distinguish relations that are caring (i.e. relations that nurture, sustain, and allow for various relational subjects and worlds to flourish creatively and dynamically; relations that take responsibility for and address historical and ongoing suffering) from those that – regardless of intent – are not? As Matt Wildcat and Daniel Voth note, ‘relationality cannot be simply about prioritizing or valuing relationships; it must be used for critical thinking needed to navigate politically fraught contexts.’<sup>35</sup>

This article seeks to continue to think in/through/with the challenges and possibilities presented by a relational ontology, and specifically the questions just noted, by starting with the hypothesis that foregrounding freedom when contemplating the task of ascertaining which relations we want

<sup>30</sup> Maggie FitzGerald, ‘Violence and care: Fanon and the ethics of care on harm, trauma, and repair’, *Philosophies*, 7:64 (2022), pp. 1–15.

<sup>31</sup> Kimberly Hutchings, ‘Decolonizing global ethics: Thinking with the pluriverse’, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 33:2 (2019), pp. 115–25.

<sup>32</sup> Fiona Robinson, ‘Methods of feminist normative theory: A political ethic of care for International Relations’, in Brook Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True (eds), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 221–40 (p. 227).

<sup>33</sup> Amanda Beattie and Kate Schick (eds), *The Vulnerable Subject: Beyond Rationalism in International Relations* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> When I use ‘we’ here, I do not mean to suggest some unified ‘we’ but mean each and every one of us, as unique beings and as beings in relation with several groups and entities that can likewise be overlapping and in excess of one another in complex ways.

<sup>35</sup> Matt Wildcat and Daniel Voth, ‘Indigenous relationality: Definitions and methods’, *AlterNative*, 19:2 (2023), pp. 475–83 (p. 476).

to live in and with can provide a crucially important criterion from which to measure our efforts at building caring relations across relations (where this includes the possibility that severing relations, or not building new ones, might be caring). But to pursue this task, I contend that we also need to rethink freedom along relational lines. The central goal of this argument is to pursue one such rethinking; with this objective in mind, I turn to the work of Beauvoir and consider freedom for the relational subject.

### The relational subject and Beauvoirian freedom

Understanding the subject as relational (i.e. as described in the previous section) is fundamentally incompatible with dominant (i.e. liberal) notions of freedom and liberty. Liberal freedom (like liberal theory more generally) is concerned, instead, with the rational, autonomous, independent subject, who experiences freedom either in its negative or positive form. Negative conceptualisations of freedom and liberty are premised upon freedom from obstacles and interference:

I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with any activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others.<sup>36</sup>

Negative freedom is exemplified by human rights frameworks which seek to ensure people are free from torture, arbitrary imprisonment, discrimination, and other ‘areas of obstruction’ by others. Positive notions of freedom, in contrast, prioritise ‘not freedom from, but freedom to – to lead one prescribed form of life.’<sup>37</sup> Freedom understood as the possibility to act and develop, ‘to be [one’s] own master,’<sup>38</sup> characterises various development and humanitarian aid programmes, which seek to provide education and economic opportunities to different populations so that they can develop their capabilities and rational capacities.<sup>39</sup> In either case, liberty is individual, and it is focused on independence;<sup>40</sup> it is about what the autonomous individual can be free from or free to do.<sup>41</sup> Yet the relational subject, as articulated above, is neither free from (being constituted as such by relations) nor free to do (in that these same relations can alternatively hinder or facilitate any given action, or more fundamentally, capacity to pursue an action).<sup>42</sup> The relational subject is tethered, inescapably, to relations, always constituted and constituting. By extension, I argue that freedom must therefore be rethought if we begin with a relational ontology; we must ‘move from a conception of freedom as independence to a conception of freedom in relationship.’<sup>43</sup>

For this task, I engage with Simone de Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity. Beauvoir’s concept of freedom is undeniably in the existentialist tradition, although with some important differences compared to the work of existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, as is emphasised below. Existentialist freedom can be thought of as comprised by two aspects: ontological freedom, or freedom as transcendence, in which ‘the responsibility of choice and the consequence of such a choice lies entirely

<sup>36</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 169.

<sup>37</sup> Berlin, *Liberty*, p. 178.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Allison Weir, ‘Global care chains: Freedom, responsibility, solidarity’, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 46:1 (2008), pp. 166–75.

<sup>41</sup> It is because of this that these two notions of freedom have often been conceived of as rival and incompatible (see Berlin, *Liberty*): someone’s freedom expressed positively might (always, necessarily) infringe someone’s negative freedom.

<sup>42</sup> More simply, it is clear that these notions of freedom are premised on an understanding of the subject who is individual and independent – a sort of radical antithesis of the relational subject.

<sup>43</sup> Weir, ‘Global care chains’, p. 167.

with the existent,<sup>44</sup> and practical freedom, which refers ‘to one’s situation, a condition of our freedom, that which the subject asserts itself against’:

One always finds oneself in a situation in relation to which freedom to make choices is conceivable. I choose future actions from the range of possible options that particular situation affords. Practical freedom admits of degrees.<sup>45</sup>

In this freedom, the ambiguity of the human condition is primary.<sup>46</sup> The subject is both Subject and Object – ‘one is both powerful enough to subject Others and weak enough to be subject to the whims of Others.’<sup>47</sup> This antinomy, in all of its ambiguity, describes what it is to be human: Subject and Object; powerful and powerless; unique and insignificant: we are free to act and yet are acted on by outside sources.<sup>48</sup> This ambiguous condition involves an interplay through which the subject becomes: ‘society shapes me from the day of my birth and it is within that society, and through my close relationship with it, that I decide who I am to be.’<sup>49</sup> From an existentialist standpoint, the subject is ‘constructed through the projects one undertakes based on those meanings<sup>50</sup> that are inherent in the society and structures we are embedded in (i.e. immanence, that which constitutes our facticity). In choosing to pursue certain projects, one chooses ‘to will oneself free.’<sup>51</sup> ‘To attain his truth, man<sup>52</sup> must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it.’<sup>53</sup> We must continually transcend,<sup>54</sup> moving always to make our own meaning and thus affirm our being:

Freedom must project itself toward its own reality through a content whose value it establishes. An end is valid only by a return to the freedom which established it and which willed itself through this end. ... To will oneself free and to will that there be *being* are one and the same choice, the choice that man makes of himself as a presence in the world.<sup>55</sup>

Now, on the surface of things, this seems quite individualist. While there is an acknowledgment that our facticity undeniably poses constraints upon us, freedom seems to be conceived of as navigating those barriers – this seems strikingly similar to liberal conceptualisations of positive freedom described above, in which autonomous and independent beings act in accordance with

<sup>44</sup> Angela Shepherd, ‘De Beauvoir, existentialism and Marx: A dialectic on freedom’, *Sartre Studies International*, 24:1 (2018), pp. 70–90 (p. 71).

<sup>45</sup> Shepard, ‘De Beauvoir, existentialism and Marx’, p. 71.

<sup>46</sup> Barbra Andrew, ‘Care, freedom, and reciprocity in the ethics of Simone de Beauvoir’, *Philosophy Today*, 42:3 (1998), pp. 290–300 (p. 291).

<sup>47</sup> Andrew, ‘Care, freedom, and reciprocity’, p. 291.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. P. Green (New York: Lancer Books, 1961), p. 456.

<sup>50</sup> Deniz Durmaş, ‘Care ethics and paternalism: A Beauvoirian approach’, *Philosophies*, 7:53 (2022), pp. 1–18 (p. 3).

<sup>51</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 34.

<sup>52</sup> Beauvoir employs gendered language throughout her work, with man standing for subjects more generally. It is reproduced here when quoting her.

<sup>53</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> It is beyond the breadth of this argument to address this point fully here, but it is worth highlighting that a language of transcendence, and related terms (future, projection forward), can be critiqued for the ways in which they have been associated with a linear notion of time. This may be problematic in so far as it excludes non-linear notions of time and the types of practices/relations co-constitutive of such notions. At the same time, it might be possible to ‘untie’ this term from this modernist association (as concepts themselves can shift and unfold in complex ways) by allowing it to travel with other concepts (like care, for instance). Given that the starting point here is one of concern for the ways in which relations of power have historically come to structure our connections, I would tentatively offer that we can think of this ‘transcendence’ as moving towards relations ‘otherwise’ – in which these harmful relations are undone. This otherwise could be seen as a ‘forward’ or ‘backward’ or totally ‘otherwise’ movement(s). Nonetheless, future work is needed to tend more fully to this concern. I thank one of the reviewers for highlighting this very important point.

<sup>55</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 47, emphasis in original.



their rational capacities. Certainly, for existentialists like Sartre, ‘others represent the only limitation on our freedom, a limitation that physical conditions alone can never impose.’<sup>56</sup> Kristana Arp continues to describe Sartre’s point:

The presence of others displaces me from my central position as meaning-giver to my world. Worse, when the other turns his gaze on me, he strips me of my transcendence, alienating my subjectivity, which I can regain from him only by objectifying him in turn. For Sartre the original relation between subjects is one of hostile opposition, a struggle to the death.<sup>57</sup>

The relational presence of the other is a hindrance to the freedom of the subject – relations and freedom are diametrically and antagonistically opposed.

While Beauvoir clearly shares much theoretical space with Sartre, I follow scholars like Barbara Andrew,<sup>58</sup> Arp,<sup>59</sup> and Deniz Durmaş,<sup>60</sup> who argue that she in fact radically opposes him on this point, switching ‘existentialism’s focus on individual freedom to a concern with nurturing and defending the freedom of others.’<sup>61</sup> She achieves this change in focus in two important ways.

First, Beauvoir’s freedom is relational because she emphasises that our socio-political-economic context – the relations we find ourselves in – can and does constrain our natural freedom (i.e. our ontological freedom – that is, the subject’s own experience of themselves as conscious, that people do things on their own accord). As Angela Shepherd argues, drawing particularly on Beauvoir’s work in *The Second Sex*,<sup>62</sup> ‘unlike Sartre, [Beauvoir] views the opportunities of transcendence as tied to the material and social conditions’<sup>63</sup> one finds oneself in. ‘The way in which we experience the world can constrain what choices are visible and available to us. Circumstances can and do pose limitations,’<sup>64</sup> both in the literal sense (e.g. obstacles and relations of power that deny certain options or possibilities) and in the sense that our subjectivities, and, by extension, our own sense of our horizons and possibilities, are shaped by the relations we are embedded in. The distinction between ontological freedom and practical freedom cannot be neatly drawn or contained;<sup>65</sup> as a result, the particularity of context (i.e. relations) is crucially intertwined with freedom for Beauvoir.

Second, drawing upon a distinction between power and freedom, Beauvoir argues, ‘It is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future.’<sup>66</sup> Significantly, ‘an open future’ – the condition of freedom – requires that all be free.

More specifically, Beauvoir mobilises a distinction between natural (described above) and moral freedom, which arises in relation to others, when we create our own projects and establish our own meaning such that it is *recognised by others*.<sup>67</sup> Simply put, ‘we need recognition of others to create and pursue our projects.’<sup>68</sup> This is how we project ourselves into the future – freedom always throws itself forward, and the future must be open for this throwing: ‘When I envisage my future, I consider the movement which, prolonging my existence of today, will fulfill my present projects and will surpass them towards new ends: the future is the definite direction of a particular

<sup>56</sup>Kristina Arp, ‘A different voice in the phenomenological tradition: Simone de Beauvoir and the ethic of care’, in Linda Fisher and Lester Embree (eds), *Feminist Phenomenology* (Philadelphia: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), pp. 71–81 (p. 73).

<sup>57</sup>Arp, ‘A different voice in the phenomenological tradition’, p. 73.

<sup>58</sup>Andrew, ‘Care, freedom, and reciprocity.’

<sup>59</sup>Arp, ‘A different voice in the phenomenological tradition.’

<sup>60</sup>Durmaş, ‘Care ethics and paternalism.’

<sup>61</sup>Arp, ‘A different voice in the phenomenological tradition’, p. 73.

<sup>62</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage, 2010).

<sup>63</sup>Shepard, ‘De Beauvoir, existentialism and Marx’, p. 78.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Shepard, ‘De Beauvoir, existentialism and Marx.’

<sup>66</sup>*The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 97.

<sup>67</sup>Durmaş, ‘Care ethics and paternalism’, p. 4, emphasis added.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

transcendence.<sup>69</sup> However, 'the future' is not some externalised totalising entity that will come to pass; 'it only exists as it is sketched out in the freely undertaken projects of human agents.'<sup>70</sup> To put it differently, because 'freedom, in order to fulfill itself, requires that it emerge into an open future,'<sup>71</sup> it is 'only the freedom of other men [that] can extend [our life projects] beyond our own life.'<sup>72</sup> 'It is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future,'<sup>73</sup> and vice versa. To be genuinely free, subjects need to interact with other free subjects in joint projects. We need others to assist, recognise, and challenge our projects. And for this recognition, assistance, and challenge to be meaningful, others must be free: they must be able to freely decide to recognise, assist, or challenge me and my task. One can easily think of an oppressive situation – indeed, there are many – in which either relations of power or one's own denial of one's freedom lends support to the life projects of others. If 'freedom realizes itself only by engaging itself in the world,'<sup>74</sup> that world must be engageable. But if others are either unable to engage (due to relations of power) or unwilling to engage (in a suppression or denial of their own moral freedom),<sup>75</sup> then there is nothing authentic for one's own freedom to engage with in the first place. 'The death of an individual is not a failure if it is integrated into a project which surpasses the limits of life';<sup>76</sup> such an integration can only be done by others in their freedom.

Subsequently, Beauvoir presents her ethics. The projects of the individual (which can only be extended if and when they gain recognition from others) must maintain and/or open up the conditions of freedom for all – they must be oriented towards an open future for all:

This act of passing beyond is conceivable only if what the content has in view is not to bar up the future, but, on the contrary, to plan new possibilities. ... My freedom must not seek to trap being but to disclose it.<sup>77</sup>

While Beauvoir's existentialist freedom is highly concerned with the Subject making their own meaning (this is, in essence, what freedom does), there are some ethical limits on this freedom: 'A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied.'<sup>78</sup> Rather, we must treat every other as a freedom: 'treating the other as a freedom means treating them as a subject who has their unique projects to pursue,'<sup>79</sup> while also ensuring that our own projects do not cut off the freedoms of others. 'Authentic actions' are actions that enhance one's own or others' freedom, while inauthentic actions are those that undermine or diminish the freedom of self or others.<sup>80</sup>

Lastly, an extension of this first ethical claim – that our projects must maintain, open up, and certainly not foreclose or impede the freedom of others – is that it is imperative that we are responsible for that which we create. In fact, freedom and taking responsibility are intimately intertwined:

Beauvoir argues that taking responsibility for the world, even though that world comes before and without us, is the first truly free act we take. Taking responsibility is an act of freedom

<sup>69</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 124–5.

<sup>70</sup> Arp, 'A different voice in the phenomenological tradition', p. 74.

<sup>71</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 88.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76–7.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51. Beauvoir says that this denial is a common response, exhibited particularly by her 'Serious Man', to the realisation that there is no external meaning. She also asserts that we must undertake the risky project of making our own meaning in the absence of external meaning (a somewhat overwhelming, and thus difficult to bear, realisation and task).

<sup>76</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 111.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>79</sup> Durmaş, 'Care ethics and paternalism', p. 6.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

because it requires us to recognize that we are in and of a world from which we cannot retreat or escape responsibility.<sup>81</sup>

From there, we must accept responsibility time and time again as we disclose and realise our own freedom, and this disclosure must likewise disclose the freedom of others. Significantly, this work is not easy: one cannot ‘assume it lightly’.<sup>82</sup> Creating one’s own meaning in light of a lack of final meaning, facing the ambiguity of human existence, and perhaps most of all, doing this in a way that does not hinder the freedom of others (more fully, opens up the freedom of others), demands a radical acceptance of the weight of these tasks. We cannot know, for certain, which of our projects will disclose freedom. ‘The fundamental ambiguity of the human condition’<sup>83</sup> means that the ends cannot a priori justify the means.<sup>84</sup> The particularity of people and context – the heterogeneity of relations that is necessarily implied by a relational ontology – renders the outcomes of our projects unknowable. The best we can do in such a state is practise ongoing self-reflection, cultivate epistemic humility, and take responsibility for what we do, our ultimate hopes, and the (unknowable) consequences of our deeds:

What distinguishes the tyrant from the man of good will is that the first rests in the certainty of his aims, whereas the second keeps asking himself, ‘Am I really working for the liberation of men? Isn’t this end contested by the sacrifices through which I aim it at?’ In setting up its ends, *freedom must put them in parentheses, confront them at each moment with the absolute end which it itself constitutes, and contest, in its own name, the means it uses to win itself.*<sup>85</sup>

While the goal of each project must be the freedom of others (or at least, one’s life project must not foreclose or impede the freedom of others), we can never know beforehand how exactly to achieve that goal – the desired outcomes of our life projects – given the ambiguity of all action in a heterogeneous other-concerning world. Nonetheless, freedom must be enacted; it must propel itself forward,<sup>86</sup> and this is a concrete ‘doing’ (‘there is no project which is purely contemplative since one always projects himself toward something, toward the future ... man never contemplates, he does’).<sup>87</sup> Beauvoir summarises these points when she writes: ‘To put it positively, the precept will be to treat the other ... as a freedom so that his end may be freedom; in using this conducting wire one will have to incur the risk, in each case, of inventing an original solution.’<sup>88</sup> There is no blueprint for how to proceed, for how to pursue life projects that disclose freedom, for how to ‘invent an original solution’: ‘Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods.’<sup>89</sup> The method, here, is epistemic humility, foregrounding the vulnerability of one’s own moral judgement and accepting the responsibility of our freedom. As Beauvoir asserts, ‘the more seriously I accept my responsibilities, the more justified [any decision] is.’<sup>90</sup> In the face of insurmountable ambiguity, taking responsibility, and critically reflecting on the effects of one’s projects, is the best that one can do.

<sup>81</sup>Melissa Mosko, ‘Emancipatory advocacy: A companion ethics for political activism’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 44:3 (2018), pp. 326–41 (pp. 329–30).

<sup>82</sup>Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 144.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>84</sup>See Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 119–20.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 144, emphasis added.

<sup>86</sup>Beauvoir goes into great detail to show how those who attempt to deny their own freedom, often out of fear of confronting the heavy responsibility of making one’s own meaning, or who exercise it carelessly (i.e. without concern for others), often create unfreedom for others and, in so doing, cut off their own freedom. *Ibid.*, chapter II.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 148.

Thus, my claim is that Beauvoir's freedom is undeniably relational, in the fullest sense. She writes, 'I concern others, and they concern me. There we have an irreducible truth.'<sup>91</sup> "Through others, we escape "the contingency and gratuitousness of pure presence"<sup>92</sup> – as others, in their freedom, take up and recognise my creative life project, my own freedom is propelled forward, *moving through the freedom of others*. But this assumes – demands – that others are free in the first place: free to meaningfully pursue their life projects and free to assess, recognise, contest, and extend my own. One's own freedom is contingent on the freedom of others.

### A framework for freedom, care, and life projects

To end this discussion, I wish to posit a beginning: a framework for thinking about freedom and care. The core of this article has argued that Beauvoir's freedom is a fruitful and generative way to think about freedom for a relational ontology. Her freedom, as discussed above, illustrates that the freedom of one is contingent on the freedom of others – freedom *itself* is relational, as it is only when we are all free that others can (freely) decide to take up (or not) our life projects and values, propelling them forward. It is not that there are relations between peoples' 'freedom' (e.g. where one's freedom to be free from harm is related to another's freedom to be free to do something); it is rather that freedom emerges relationally, as others freely recognise and affirm our own freedom.

From this conclusion – that freedom emerges relationally – we can find many openings and possibilities. To close this argument, I offer a sketch of one of these possibilities, particularly in relation to notions of care, and the challenges related to care outlined in earlier sections: how do we know which worlds (relations, practices) to care for, and which care practices need changing? I suspect that freedom can serve as a crucially important criterion from which to help make this judgement. When considering which life projects we wish to pursue (which relations across relations we want to build, which relations we want to care for, which relations we want to amend, and which relations we wish to end, refuse, or abandon), it is useful to foreground that these projects should, at the very least, not be an obstacle for the freedom of self and others, and ideally, they should work to disclose freedom. This is of special significance for those in the modern world, who have many historical and ongoing atrocities to account for.<sup>93</sup>

Of course, as Beauvoir emphasises, this is challenging work, not least because we cannot know in advance the ends of life projects. I argue, then, that freedom can be thought of as a criterion from which to 'measure' in an ongoing way whether our relations and practices serve liberation or oppression. Our projects – the relations we want to maintain, transform, or build – must work towards freedom; we must assess continually if our actions, deeds, relations, and care work serve as liberatory practices, or if they (often inadvertently) uphold and maintain relations of oppression. Putting Beauvoir's freedom in conversation with the ethics of care centres the importance of liberation in care ethics, which has often focused on how to live well and meet people's needs, but with less explicit discussion of the significance of freedom in and for these tasks.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that it may seem that the ethics of care and Beauvoir's scholarship more generally are incompatible; Beauvoir has been critiqued for her dismissive views of domestic work<sup>94</sup> and her ambiguous views on mothering and reproductive labour<sup>95</sup> – labour

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>92</sup> Arp, 'A different voice in the phenomenological tradition', p. 281, citing Simone de Beauvoir, 'Pyrrhus and Cineas', in Margret Simons (eds), *Philosophical Writings* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 89–149 (p. 129).

<sup>93</sup> Again, I start from the normative stance that addressing past and ongoing harms is of ethical import for those in the modern world. This is not, however, to suggest that we can 'fix', in some totalising sense, the past or control fully our movements otherwise; the ambiguity of all life projects, as this article highlights, points to this impossibility. However, I am pursuing this line of argumentation because I do believe we can move towards better relations and towards minimising harm and suffering. I aim for 'better', or 'good enough', not some utopian world of innocent care.

<sup>94</sup> See Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>95</sup> Alison Jaggar and William McBride, "'Reproduction" as male ideology', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 8:3 (1985), pp. 185–96.

that is undeniably deeply implicated in care. That is, Beauvoir conceptualises freedom as a productive, creative, project, in which we ‘*pro-ject* ourselves into the future by creating new possibilities and taking responsibility for what we create in the world’.<sup>96</sup> Given that the ethics of care argues that care work (the practices and knowledges in and through which we *reproduce* ourselves, others, and our worlds) is often focused on maintaining and re-establishing that which is, it seems incompatible with the type of creative freedom that Beauvoir stipulates. And certainly, Beauvoir’s own writing explicitly points to this at times. For example, she writes: ‘Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying, and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation.’<sup>97</sup> It seems that practices of care are associated with immanence, and thereby separate from practices of freedom which are transcendence. Care, as a result, is relegated to the position of ‘lesser’ (although not unimportant) activity.

However, Durmaş argues that:

Beauvoir accords utmost value to activities of immanence because they create the environment in which activities of transcendence are practiced. In other words, they are prerequisite for any transcendent activity and hence for any type of expression of freedom.<sup>98</sup>

From this perspective, care, as ‘the constant production of human capabilities and relationships, ... unfolds both in the realm of necessity and in the realm of freedom’.<sup>99</sup> As the milieu in which freedom emerges, care is always implicated in transcendence. Our caring relations create the conditions, or not, in and through which freedom is possible, and in and through which certain subjects develop the capacity to surpass their own immanence. Care and freedom are not diametrically opposed; they are inextricably intertwined.

Furthermore, from this perspective, activities of freedom must be aimed at transforming those relations and practices of care which impede the freedoms of certain groups (e.g. colonial ‘care’,<sup>100</sup> the unjust distribution of care responsibilities, which are often shouldered by women and especially women of colour, and the ways in which ‘care’ has been mobilised to oppress people with disabilities). In this way, activities of freedom can also be thought of as care practices: practices that foster relational contexts which open up and disclose freedom for oneself and others.<sup>101</sup> More succinctly, in reading Beauvoir and the ethics of care together, we are not left with a division between care and freedom, in which care is dismissed or devalued. We are, in fact, provided with a vantage point to consider critically which practices of care maintain conditions of oppression, and which practices resist or work to change these very conditions. The latter practices, I assert, can be thought of as radical practices of care, i.e. care ‘as a liberatory practice’.<sup>102</sup>

Finally, in putting Beauvoir’s freedom in conversation with the ethics of care, it also becomes clear that if we wish to foster relational praxis (e.g. the transformative work of cultivating relations in which we all want to live), we must, at the very least, all be free to do this work. Building relations

<sup>96</sup> Mosko, ‘Emancipatory advocacy’, p. 329, emphasis in original.

<sup>97</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 89.

<sup>98</sup> Durmaş continues by explaining how she reads Beauvoir as critiquing the relegation of care work to a certain group (women and feminised folk), thereby creating oppressive conditions. This does not equate to devaluing such activities per se. For more on this point, see Durmaş, ‘Care ethics and paternalism’, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> Paul Leduc Browne, ‘Disposable time, freedom, and care’, *Science & Society*, 75:3 (2011), pp. 297–324 (p. 300).

<sup>100</sup> Riikka Prattes, ‘Colonial care: Care in the service of whiteness’, *Essays in Philosophy*, 24:1 (2023), pp. 41–57; Uma Narayan, ‘Colonialism and its others: Considerations on rights and care discourses’, *Hypatia*, 10:2 (1995), pp. 133–40.

<sup>101</sup> While it is beyond the breadth of this article to develop or address this point fully, I do not think that every care practice is a freedom. Given the ways in which care is devalued in the global political economy, and given the unequal distribution of care responsibilities (often along gendered, racialised lines), many care practices operate against freedom (in so far as they are tied up and unfold in oppressive systems). The question of whether every practice of freedom could be considered care is, perhaps, less clear. This, however, is a problem for a future paper.

<sup>102</sup> Andrew, ‘Care, freedom, and reciprocity’, p. 294.

of care that are meaningful depends on the freedom of everyone. In order to truly construct collective life projects, everyone must be free to pursue their own project, to project themselves through their freedom, and then to freely work with others (or challenge others) in this work. The care relations or life projects that will be found to be meaningful to all involved can be revealed only if all involved are free to assess, critique, and take up such relations.

Certain care ethics literature,<sup>103</sup> while not mobilising a grammar of freedom, has foregrounded this important point by discussing the role of voice and speaking authentically – of being able to assert one’s hopes, desires, interests, and concerns genuinely. Without the capacity to speak authentically, we cannot have the dialogues necessary to adjudicate competing care practices, abolish harmful connections, and build other practices and relations anew. Yet the capacity to speak freely requires that one be free – free from relations of power that directly suppress one’s freedom (directly limit one’s ‘ability to create value and meaning in the world through an active participation in that world’),<sup>104</sup> as well as systems of oppression that shape subjectivity in ways that diminish one’s relationship to oneself, frustrating ‘subjectivity by limiting the development of the very capacities necessary for participation in the world.’<sup>105</sup> Deciding which relations we want to live in and with – surely, a central concern for the field of International Studies – demands that everyone be free so as to partake meaningfully in this collective interweaving of life projects. It demands that we be responsible for the ways in which the freedom of some is foreclosed *before* we even begin to think about which relations across relations we want to build (if any). We must be accountable for the relations *from which we emerge*, which we have already built. As Kate Schick emphasises, this accountability might demand that we transform our relation(s) with ourselves first and foremost,<sup>106</sup> i.e. before seeking to form new relations across relations with others and/or severing certain relations altogether. We must be responsible for our existing relations, which form the very environment or milieu in which transcendence is possible (or not) in the first place.

This may sound a bit like the ‘chicken or the egg’ problem: which comes first? Do we need freedom to build relations across relations, or must we build relations across relations that disclose freedom? In some ways, I anticipate that this is precisely the point. While this closing discussion is but a starting point, and much work remains to be done here, my tentative claim is that a primary project for a relational praxis for International Studies might be thought of as an interweaving of freedom and care: we strive to enact our own relations of care that work to liberate all and, in so doing, create the very conditions under which other life projects (other relations across relations) can be pursued, taken up, and propelled forward. Freedom (the ability to transcend, pursue life projects) requires conditions of care (a relational milieu free from oppression), and care (relations that support unique and heterogeneous subjects and worlds) requires conditions of freedom (the conditions under which we are all, in our heterogeneity, able to authentically take up said relations or not). Freedom and care, which interweave together to form the very ethical space and conditions in and through which it becomes possible to pursue various life projects in the first place, may provide one orientation for studying and practising international relations in a manner that seeks to move towards building, amending, and maintaining (international) relations that support everyone. Further developing tools and practices that can help us explore and assess the relation between freedom and care (as articulated here, but also as may be articulated otherwise) is but one site for continuing this work.

<sup>103</sup> See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Carol Gilligan, *The Birth of Pleasure: A New Map of Love* (New York: Random House, 2003); Carol Gilligan and Namoi Snider, *Why Does Patriarchy Persist?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

<sup>104</sup> Mosko, ‘Emancipatory advocacy’, p. 330.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Kate Schick, ‘From ambivalence to vulnerability: Recognition and the subject’, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 52:4 (2022), pp. 595–608.

## Conclusion: Relational freedom and International Studies

The field of International Studies has often been concerned with either negative conceptualisations of freedom and liberty (i.e. freedom from obstacles and interference) or positive notions of freedom (i.e. the possibility to act and develop), rooted in the rational, autonomous, independent subject of liberalism. However, focusing on relations, moving towards a relational ontology, and understanding the subject as relational, means that many key concepts, ideas, and methodologies in the discipline must be rethought. Drawing upon Simone de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity (1947), this article contributes to this task by putting forward a relational understanding of freedom. As Beauvoir argues, and as presented here, freedom itself emerges relationally; while the ends of our practices and relations are always contingent, we must be attuned to the fact that our own freedom moves through the freedom of others.

This understanding of freedom as relational, this article argues, is especially pertinent in terms of the challenge of adjudicating which relations we want to live in and with, which life projects we want to pursue. From a relational standpoint, different relations are practiced, enacted, ruptured, and reproduced, and different relations across relations can be drawn, remade, or severed. However, distinguishing which relations across relations we want to uphold and care for, which connections we wish to make, and which should be ended, is messy and difficult work that unfolds in and through relations of power. As scholars like Todd, Watts, Starblanket, and Stark show, there are many risks involved in the business of relating, and the task of caring for relations involves both generative and destructive possibilities.

Certainly, this problem has been articulated in different ways in various International Studies scholarship, although the central concern is broadly shared. For instance, Karin M. Fierke and Vivienne Jabri emphasise that the 'global' in 'global IR' is not a pregiven entity but is rather constituted. As such, we need analytic tools and methods that attune us to 'the relational, unfixed and open-ended aspects of [this] process of constitution that is global'.<sup>107</sup> Starting from a 'relational ontology of entanglement where parts are continuously defined and redefined within a global space that is continuously in flux',<sup>108</sup> Fierke and Jabri offer 'global conversations' as one such method, defined as 'an exchange between multiple parties that changes all who are involved'.<sup>109</sup> In such an exchange, we may come to constitute a global that might help us 'begin to rethink how contemporary divisions in global space, and indeed the fragmentation of global space, have placed constraints on who we are, who we talk to, where we fight, who is out, and who is in', while also highlighting that although 'none of this is fixed or certain ... much of it is in need of healing and justice'.<sup>110</sup> Querejazu uses a different concept and method, rooted in cosmopraxis, to point similarly to the question of 'how relations relate', meaning 'the constant and ongoing interaction of co-constitutive and transformative processes that create realities'.<sup>111</sup> Without losing sight of the differences between these two approaches (as well as the differences between other approaches, such as work on care that is the focus of this argument), there is a shared concern across these literatures pertaining to the question of how relations relate, and the generative *and* harmful possibilities therein.

This article, drawing upon the relational notion of freedom provided by Beauvoir, contributes to this scholarship in International Studies by arguing that freedom – rethought along relational lines – is deeply important when reflecting on how relations relate, when considering the conditions of 'global conversations', or when contemplating the question of how to care for different relations and practices that sustain forms of life and the various subjects therein (as is the focus here). That is, freedom can be thought of as a criterion for thinking critically about the milieu in which relations relate, in which our global conversations unfold, in which we enact our practices of care, in which we pursue our life projects. When that milieu is characterised by unfreedom,

<sup>107</sup>Fierke and Jabri, 'Global conversations', p. 509.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 515.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., p. 510.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., p. 530.

<sup>111</sup>Querejazu, 'Cosmopraxis', p. 877.

it will shape the ways in which these things unfold – often in ways that, for instance, ‘silence’ non-Western ways of knowing-being, invisibilise more-than-human beings and non-human agency, or position Indigenous women to be responsible for relations of care while silencing their voices in broader public discourse. We must be attuned to (relational) freedom as we continue conceptual and methodological work in International Studies that is focused on the question(s) of how/if/when/should relations relate.

This argument has also sketched some additional possibilities in this line of thinking via a nascent dialogue between this relational freedom and the ethics of care. More precisely, it is posited that care and freedom weave together to form the very ethical space and conditions in and through which it becomes possible to pursue various life projects (various sets of relations relating) in the first place. A framework of freedom and care may therefore provide one orientation for studying and practising International Studies in a manner that moves towards building, amending, and maintaining relations that better support everyone (where this, crucially, also entails the ending of relations which oppress, harm, and cause suffering). But, certainly, this is but a beginning. Future work on relational freedom is needed, including reflexive work that perhaps problematises the notions of relations, practices, care, and freedom that shape this discussion, the temporal and spatial dimensions that contour this argument, and the normative commitments that underpin the very idea and possibility of adjudicating which care practices and relations we want to live in and with. To be sure, the possibilities of this argument will only emerge in how it is taken up and brought into relation (or not) with other concepts, methods, and frameworks as we undertake the collective task of studying, practising, and enacting international relations.

**Acknowledgements.** This paper was first presented at the International Studies Association Annual Conference in March 2023. A revised version was also presented to the Department of Political Science at the University of Alberta. I wish to sincerely thank Kate Schick and Didier Zúñiga for their generous encouragement and engagement with this work at these venues. Thank you to Simon McPhee for editorial assistance. Finally, my gratitude to the two peer reviewers and the editors of the journal – specifically, Dr Maja Zehfuss, Dr Soumita Basu, and Dr Andrew R. Hom – for exceptional insights and feedback that enriched this argument, and my thinking, immensely.

**Maggie FitzGerald** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Studies at the University of Saskatchewan.