

Elizabeth Ben-Ishai  
**Fostering Autonomy: A Theory of Citizenship, the State, and Social Service  
Delivery**

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"Ben-Ishai's greatest strength is her ability to make pointed and compelling critiques of existing social-service programs in the US that, if followed, would substantively restructure the way citizens are given access to rights and opportunities. She does so without attempting to formulate any idealized unifying theory."

Elizabeth Ben-Ishai's *Fostering Autonomy: A Theory of Citizenship, the State, and Social Service Delivery* calls for profound readjustments to social services within the US. Throughout the text, she shows how a variety of state programs are informed by traditional conceptions of autonomy that fail to pay tribute to the relationships necessary for an individual to act in accordance with her future plans. Ben-Ishai develops a feminist-inspired conception of *relational autonomy* that builds from the works of Marilyn Friedman, Richard Fallon, T. H. Marshall, and Nancy Fraser, among others, to readjust the ways in which we conceive of theories and policies regarding citizenship and social services. She weaves these relational notions into an analysis of a number of case studies where the state either falls short of, or makes headway toward, fostering autonomy for citizens. With respect to the former, Ben-Ishai shows where the state incorrectly utilizes atomistic individualized accounts of autonomy in justifying and implementing policy decisions. These faulty individualistic accounts render state officials and citizens alike reliant upon distorted views of political responsibility and autonomy-fostering conditions that, once adopted, stigmatize citizens who make use of social-welfare resources. Ben-Ishai also identifies programs that seemingly fail to foster autonomy; however, once such programs are analyzed with a relational focus, she is able to bring to light evidence for some of the ways in which the state has successfully fostered autonomy.

#### *A Revised Conception of Social Citizenship*

Ben-Ishai uses her notion of relational autonomy to criticize conventional conceptions of social citizenship. In these conceptions state officials make decisions by presupposing a notion of status where citizens are granted material resources on the basis of state-sanctioned need interpretation. Ben-Ishai finds the conventional conceptions exclusionary insofar as they involve having an individual's needs be predetermined by the state. In other words, the state paternalistically decides what counts as inhibiting the freedoms of citizens.

For instance, under conventional conceptions, in order to gain autonomy (that is, in order to receive state services) a single mother must engage in particular (heteronormative) intimate relationships and abide by domination-based conceptions of work. The mother's "failure" to engage in such a way is interpreted by the state as jeopardizing her own autonomy. This relegates the mother's current relationships and experiences to a second-class status.

According to Ben-Ishai, the traditional conceptions of citizenship negatively impact solidarity-building by over-emphasizing personal responsibility (that is, status achievement) and misrecognizing political responsibility (that is, relationship-based conditions for fostering autonomy). By revising our conceptions of social citizenship, she argues, state officials can overcome relations of domination and other constraints that pervade the delivery of current social services.

#### *A Brief Overview of the Cases*

Building from this new conception of social citizenship, Ben-Ishai focuses on case studies that reveal a set of paternalistic social-welfare approaches premised on the idea that citizens lack the competence and capacities to act autonomously. Each case calls for state supervision to help citizens attain "self-sufficiency." These programs grant services on the basis of state-sanctioned conditions that are justified by a particular set of restrictive and misconceived (that is, individualistic/atomistic) values. In relying upon such values, the state perpetuates coercion over citizens by reinforcing the unjust power relations that place

citizens in need of social services to begin with. Ben-Ishai critiques those assumptions built into social-service programs that make accessibility to full citizenship conditional on the requirement that (able-bodied) citizens join a workforce (for example, the assumption that childcare is freely available). This requirement treats individuals as though they lack intentionality and competence.

Ben-Ishai extends her conception of social citizenship further with an analysis of immigration, this time taking aim at faulty conceptions of political responsibility that pay little heed to global relationships. Welfare claims of immigrants to the US are denied on the basis of state policies that overstress the responsibility of individuals in fulfilling their current needs. A more politically responsible conception—that is, one that considers the contexts where affluent countries impact developing countries—will see the fulfillment of immigrant welfare claims as an act of political (state) responsibility (93).

The negative assessments of current social services aside, Ben-Ishai also makes strides toward constructing positive models of social-service delivery. She draws on a "coordinated community response" (CCR) model in order to adapt to the fragmented structure of the state—a model that entails "various loosely coupled arms that are sometimes in conflict with one another" (96). In abandoning the notion that state approaches can be politically neutral or universally applied, Ben-Ishai explores CCR cases where conflicts emerge from state-service provisions that, in some ways, advance harm, but in others reduce it. For instance, women who are physically abused face the dilemma of incurring further harm when they report the violence. Ben-Ishai balances the trade-offs between seeking prosecution to obtain safety and facing further abuse from the batterer. With alternative cases, Ben-Ishai examines the conflicts that emerge with harm-reduction programs revolving around cases of drug use. She critiques the notion of a zero-sum relationship of autonomy by recognizing the costs and benefits associated with drug use. She emphasizes an embodied conception of autonomy to show how citizens can navigate complex relationships through user-run treatment programs. Ben-Ishai argues that relationally informed harm-reduction programs can mediate the cost/benefit trade-offs of drug use, while recognizing the clients as citizens.

### *Strengths*

Ben-Ishai's greatest strength is her ability to make pointed and compelling critiques of existing social-service programs in the US that, if followed, would substantively restructure the way citizens are given access to rights and opportunities. She does so without attempting to formulate any idealized unifying theory. In place of such a traditionally normative and idealistic approach, she finds value in the fragmented structure of state services, as "messy and incomplete as they may be" (164). Her solutions are user-friendly in that they attend to the embodied needs of citizens and redirect social-service practitioners in specific, practical ways. By emphasizing that "occasional instances of successful autonomy fostering provide the basis for a theory of an autonomy-fostering state," Ben-Ishai is able to stay consistent with the consequences of using a relational conception of political theory (153). This theoretical approach, though admittedly imperfect, provides a highly useful account for how state officials ought to adjust their social services. More important, she effectively shows how citizens who are typically marginalized and stigmatized—often, this is the very reason they seek social-welfare services in the first place—can have their situations exacerbated by misconceived approaches to fostering autonomy that continue not only to perpetuate the oppression, but disproportionately place responsibility on individuals rather than on social relations.

### *Weaknesses*

One critique I can offer pertains to Ben-Ishai's use of an "empirically situated" approach to political theory. Although Ben-Ishai has made a purposeful attempt to steer clear of what she calls "positivistic" political theory, she continues to draw upon traditional positivistic distinctions between the normative and the empirical. She leans toward the situated, empirical "side," arguing that this situated empirical position is distinct from normative theorizing. Maintaining this distinction is inconsistent with her desire to move beyond positivism. The very feminist approach she champions has shown us that normative theorizing is never independent of empirical content, and vice-versa. There is much value to be found in empirically

rich, if inexact, accounts of relational autonomy that are normative through and through in their ability to alleviate the oppressive circumstances of marginalized citizens in our society.

I will close by highlighting how Ben-Ishai's work recaptures the significance of autonomy in liberal theory by appropriately situating it in the context of social relationships. She conducts normative assessments of current state policies in a way that policymakers can utilize. Scholars studying political theories and state policies in a contemporary US context will appreciate this work.

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