

Supporting intimates on faith

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Abstract What is the role of faith in the familiar practice of supporting intimates in their personal projects? Is there anything distinctly valuable about such faith-based support? I argue that the virtue of being supportive, a characteristic of the good friend or lover, involves a distinctive kind of faith: faith in another persons' chosen self-expressive pursuit(s). Support based on such faith enables the supported party to enjoy a more meaningful and autonomous exercise of agency in self-expressive arenas, and engenders a sense of relational unity or solidarity, deepening the normative and emotional bonds of the relationship.

Keywords Faith · Support · Autonomy · Solidarity · Modally demanding value · Intimate relationship

Introduction

What is the role of faith in interpersonal relationships? More specifically, what is the role of faith in the familiar practice of supporting intimates in their personal projects? Is there anything distinctly valuable about such faith-based support? I want to address these questions by focusing on *thick* interpersonal relationships. Paradigmatic instances of these include close friendships, romantic or committed relationships, and the relationship between parent and adult child. The category may also include relationships between siblings, colleagues, and neighbors. What makes these relationships *thick* is a certain shared history between the individuals in the relationship: some sufficient degree of engagement, interaction, and regard between them over time. Moreover, the relationships typically involve significant

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vulnerability and trust. In the relevant cases, we tend to say not merely that the participants *stand in some relation to* one another, but that they *have a relationship with* one another.

The questions posed at the outset concern a *generalized* notion of faith that is not restricted to the religious context: the notion could in principle apply to the question of God's existence as well as to a friend's loyalty. To explore the role of faith in interpersonal relationships, I shall draw on Lara Buchak's account of faith (see Buchak 2012). Because I am interested in the act or activity of supporting intimates in their projects on the basis of faith that the project is choiceworthy, Buchak's account—which explicitly relates faith to a proposition and to an action that expresses the proposition—suits my purposes well.¹

My discussion is organized as follows. I begin with general reflections about the stance and practice of being supportive. Next, I characterize *the virtue of being supportive* (a particular virtue possessed by *good* friends and lovers), offering an interpretation of the virtue as a “modally demanding value.” (The notion of “modally demanding value” is presented in Pettit 2016.) I then draw on Buchak's account of faith to argue that the virtue of being supportive involves a distinctive kind of faith: faith that our intimate's *self-expressive pursuits* are choiceworthy. (Self-expressive pursuits are projects that allow for the expression of a person's practical identity and values. In modern Western societies, they are often associated with leading a meaningful, rewarding, and authentic human life.) After describing the role of faith in the virtue of being supportive, I articulate some respects in which this kind of faith-based support is especially valuable or worthy. More specifically, I argue that faith-based support: (1) enables the supported party to enjoy a more meaningful and autonomous exercise of agency in self-expressive arenas, and (2) engenders a sense of relational unity or solidarity, deepening the normative and emotional bonds of the relationship.

Being supportive: general reflections

In the interpersonal context, the term ‘support’ is associated with providing aid, care, comfort, and encouragement, particularly to someone undergoing a trial or ordeal.² When I support you in the aftermath of your spouse's sudden death, my support may involve helping you make funeral arrangements or notifying relatives or looking after your children. In doing these things, I help you get ‘back on your feet.’ Your PhD supervisor may support you in your aspiration to become a member of the scientific community, helping you to secure the kind of meaningful, fulfilling life you aspire to lead advancing human understanding.

¹ Although I rely primarily on Buchak's account to make my points, other important accounts of faith as a non-doxastic, risk-taking attitude are also relevant. See Howard-Snyder (2016) and McKaughan (2016).

² The account of the stance and practice of being supportive presented here draws on and develops my account in Tsai (forthcoming).

Just as a bridge or architectural structure needs support because of the downward pressure of gravity, so the person in need of support (typically) needs it because there is something in their life *weighing them down*—something bringing stress, struggle, and adversity upon them.³ Certain objective conditions in the person's life generate the need to be supported, and these can include psychological conditions like addiction, depression, and grief. In being supportive, we are usually supporting someone *in something* or *with respect to something*—some aspect or condition of the person's life. That is, the stance and practice of being supportive is best understood as a three-place relation: A supports B in C, where the C term stands for some relevant circumstance, context, or domain of B's life.⁴

I want to register three general (but not exhaustive) types of support-needed circumstances, C. These circumstances are connected with: (1) unchosen misfortune, (2) self-inflicted misfortune, and (3) self-expressive pursuit. Examples of unchosen misfortunes include: having one's home destroyed by a flood, losing one's spouse in a plane crash, and falling into a serious depression. In these cases, someone is in a bad way but it is not their fault that they confront the situation. The fact that they are in the situation is not a result of their direct agency or something that could have been reasonably anticipated or prevented. The agent is in an important sense *passive* to the situation's coming about, bearing no (special or particular) responsibility for it.

Examples of self-inflicted misfortunes include: being justly imprisoned for committing a crime, failing out of university as a result of failing to take one's academic work seriously, and gambling away one's family savings at the casino. In these cases, someone is in a bad way, but there is a sense in which it is their fault that they face the situation. The fact that they are in the situation is a result of their agency, or could have been reasonably foreseen and prevented. The agent bears some significant responsibility for their situation.

Examples of self-expressive pursuits include: starting a charter school for disadvantaged children, coming out as an openly transgendered public figure, adopting a child, and embarking on a committed romantic relationship. In these cases, the person in the support-relevant circumstance is pursuing an activity, engagement, project, or relationship central to their identity—their *sense of self*. In contrast to the first case (unchosen misfortunes), but like the second case (self-inflicted misfortunes), the agent is in an important sense *active* (as opposed to *passive*) with respect to their being in the support-relevant circumstance: their agency (choice, decision, commitment, or reflective endorsement) is directly

³ To be sure, one can be supportive of intimates in uplifting, celebratory contexts too: consider the friend who is consistently there to celebrate one's birthdays, promotions, graduation, etc. While support of this sort is valued and valuable, I shall here focus on support when we are weighed down rather than when we are doing well. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to these positive cases.

⁴ This formulation needn't overlook the phenomenon of *simply* being supportive of another: being supportive of someone without apparent reference to any particular circumstance, context, or domain of that person's life. But since this generalized form of support can be understood as involving a willingness to bear costs to hold up the other in a several (if not all) circumstances, contexts, and domains, the C term is still tacitly present.

implicated in the situation.⁵ In that sense, the person bears some responsibility for being in a situation that calls for support.

Self-expressive pursuits include activities, projects, and relationships that allow a person to express who they are and what they value in an important sense associated with leading a meaningful and fulfilling life. In the modern western industrialized context, they constitute answers or resolutions to practical questions regarding issues like: what profession or career to pursue, what kinds of projects to engage in, what kinds of relationships and family arrangements to enter into, whether and when to have children and how many, what kind of friends and intimates to have, where to live, and what communities and associations and religious groups to join. When we are supportive of an intimate's self-expressive pursuit, we willingly shoulder burdens on their behalf to hold them up in a circumstance linked to their pursuit of an activity, project, or relationship central to their sense of self.

So far, I have focused on the supported persons and their support-relevant circumstances. I turn now to the supporting party and what is involved in providing support. The notion of *weight* in the literal idea of support as bearing the weight of something suggests that being supportive in the interpersonal context can involve bearing burdens that one would not otherwise. To support someone is to hold them up, by means that can involve bearing or shouldering or absorbing or assuming significant burdens or costs on their behalf, for their sake.

Consider the varieties of support in our interpersonal lives: parents taking out second home mortgages to finance their children's university education; spouses quitting their jobs to re-locate to another part of the world so that their significant other can accept a promotion or advance their career; and neighbors preparing meals for the couple grieving the recent loss of a child. A less weighty example of cost-bearing is that of holding up our friends in their romantic pursuits: say, by enduring unpleasant social outings with a friend and their insufferable significant other, or cancelling important plans to give comfort when their relationship falls apart. It is a familiar fact that the broken-hearted are often long-winded and repetitive in airing grievances and regrets; supporting a broken-hearted friend can demand significant amounts of time and energy.

Holding someone up can even involve acting in ways that stands in uneasy practical tension with one's ideals or principles. For example, in social contexts where gay-marriage is not legally sanctioned, feminists and gay activists of certain bents may still attend the weddings of their heterosexual friends, despite their objections to the intrinsic or contingent properties of the marriage institution. Indeed, they may go beyond merely attending the weddings of their heterosexual friends and assist with the wedding planning. Similarly, someone who is an ethical vegetarian might support a friend's plans to open up a non-vegetarian restaurant (say, by providing a loan or getting the word out about the grand opening), even

⁵ Having stressed that self-expressive pursuits are chosen or endorsed in distinguishing them from circumstances of misfortune, it should be noted that self-expressive pursuits are often experienced by the agent not as a matter of choice or decision but of necessity. But even if self-expressive pursuits often have the force of practical necessity as a matter of phenomenology, we can nonetheless assume responsibility for our self-expressive pursuits.

despite having serious scruples about the practice of eating meat. Indeed, ethical vegetarians will often dine out with their non-vegetarian friends (say, to cheer up a despondent mutual friend), and refrain from initiating discussion of the ethics of eating meat. Willingly splitting the bill equally with their omnivorous friends, they in effect subsidize the others who order the more expensive meat dishes. These cases involve a kind of compromise of one's ethical commitments (to marriage equality, to animal rights): in lending support, one does not act in a way that meets the highest or purest standards of the relevant ideal.

Holding someone up can thus involve assuming significant costs—sacrifices in time, opportunities lost, financial and non-financial resources, psychic and physical energy, and even compromises in one's moral commitments and personal ideals. More generally, the *practice* of being supportive—the *activity* of being supportive—typically involves the provision of certain benefits or resources (care, concern, comfort, assistance, advice, guidance, and encouragement) in order to hold someone up, typically by means of bearing costs (in financial and non-financial resources, lost opportunities, time, physical and psychic energy, reputation and social-esteem, and compromise of ideals).⁶ The *stance* of being supportive—the disposition or attitudes that undergirds supportive behavior—typically involves a willingness to absorb costs on behalf of the supported intimate, out of other-regarding concern.⁷ Put differently, a willingness to absorb costs on behalf of our intimates is one (typical, paradigmatic) way by which we express the support that is essential to our close relationships.

Given that support typically involves the assumption of significant costs on the part of the supporter, what psychological attitudes help to realize and sustain it? I shall argue that faith has a role to play to enable support.⁸ The remainder of the discussion will focus on bringing out the role of faith in the case of supporting an intimate in their self-expressive pursuit. In particular, I focus on the role of faith in the kind of support that takes on a rich, robust form.

The virtue of being supportive

Let us distinguish between support that is highly contingent on features of the actual circumstance, on the one hand, and support that is more robust, steadfast, and unconditional, on the other. I shall call the former *providing mere support* and the latter *exercising the virtue of being supportive*. My aim in this section is to characterize the virtue of being supportive as an instance of what Philip Pettit

⁶ Of course, this does not mean that the supportive intimate must always experience the cost-bearing as *cost-bearing*. In many cases, to experience one's support of an intimate under the description of bearing costs is to have, in the words of Bernard Williams, 'one thought too many' (see Williams 1981). Nevertheless, it remains true that being supportive often involves bearing costs, even if the supportive intimate needn't (sometimes shouldn't) experience their supportive behavior in such terms.

⁷ This willingness consists in certain characteristic patterns of thought, feeling, and responses, including being disposed to treat certain kinds of considerations as supplying reasons for certain kinds of response and action.

⁸ Related attitudes like trust, hope, and love may also have a role; my focus here is on faith.

calls a *modally demanding value* (see Pettit 2016). In the next section, I theorize the role of faith in enabling the exercise of this virtue, arguing that this virtue is partly constituted and sustained by a certain kind of faith.

In labeling support that is more robust, steadfast, and unconditional a *virtue*, I mean to imply an *evaluative difference* between providing mere support and exercising the virtue of being supportive.⁹ I suggest that the virtue of being supportive (so understood) is a quality of intimates that relate to us well or admirably—a quality, that is, of *good* friends, *good* romantic partners, *good* parents, and *good* colleagues. And I argue that there is something distinctly preferable, especially worthy about the kind of support that is more robust, steadfast, and unconditional—that kind of support that relies in part on faith—insofar as it facilitates and realizes (in a way that mere support does not) certain important goods.

Modally demanding values are values the instantiation of which depends not only on what actually happens, but also on what would happen across a range of non-actual (or possible) circumstances. To get a sense of the structure of modally demanding values, consider the case of freedom. One might claim that freedom simply consists in actual non-interference. Against this claim, Pettit argues that, it is not enough simply to consider what is *actually* done to one—whether one is *in fact* interfered with, constrained, or coerced—to determine whether or not one enjoys freedom. To enjoy freedom, it must also be true that one *would* enjoy non-coercion or non-interference across a range of non-actual circumstances.

Take the paradigm of an unfree person: the slave. Slaves are typically coerced and interfered with on an arbitrary basis by their masters. But we could imagine a slave with a benevolent master, who, as a matter of fact, has never laid a hand on him—a master who provides him a comfortable cottage to live in, fine meals to eat, and four weeks off each the year. Even if the slave is treated quite well in all these respects *as a matter of fact*, still, he is a slave, insofar as the following is true: if the benevolent master wanted to, he could do all sorts of horrible things to him—force him to work against his will, and whip him. This suggests that freedom is a modally demanding value. To be free, it is not enough for one to be provided the good of non-coercion (or non-interference) on an arbitrary basis; it must also be the case that one would continue to enjoy the thin good of non-coercion (or non-interference) across a range of non-actual situations (see Pettit 2016).

Consider, next, the case of honesty. Honesty is also a modally demanding value in that to be honest, it is not enough that one tell the truth (avoid deceiving and misleading others) *actually*. To be honest, it must also be the case that one *would* continue to tell the truth (avoid deception) across a range of non-actual circumstances. To see this, imagine someone—call him Mark—whose life is such that he is never faced with a situation wherein he would personally benefit by telling a lie (or acting deceptively). Moreover, suppose that Mark, if he were presented with a situation wherein he would personally benefit by telling a lie (and acting

⁹ What the evaluative difference consists in will become apparent as the discussion unfolds, but it should be noted that instances of mere support might still count as virtuous in the thin sense of having moral value—for example, being worthy of praise or admiration.

deceptively, misleadingly), he would not hesitate to do so. Intuitively, it seems that Mark is not an honest person. If this is right, it suggests that honesty is a modally demanding value: it is not enough to be honest to simply tell the truth *actually*; to be honest, it must also be the case that one would continue to tell the truth *across a range of non-actual situations*. Like the *status* of freedom, then, the *character trait* of honesty is also a modally demanding value.¹⁰

Consider, now, the idea that the virtue of being supportive is a modally demanding value. To say that the virtue of being supportive is a modally demanding value is to say that it requires not merely that the supportive intimate *actually* possess a willingness to shoulder burdens to hold up the supported intimate in the actual circumstance tied to their self-expressive pursuit, but also that the supportive intimate *would be* prepared to do so across a range of relevant non-actual circumstances.

Suppose you are deliberating what to do with your life: what career or profession to pursue? After thinking it over, you decide you want to pursue a career in medicine. Suppose that as a matter of fact, your parents are quite willing to assume costs to hold you up in this pursuit: They offer to pay a substantial portion of your tuition, provide you lots of encouragement, cook you comforting meals when you're stressed out, and so on. Suppose, moreover, that, as a matter of fact, a medical career is expected to be very lucrative, carries significant social prestige, allows you to live nearby, and makes them the envy of my friends. However, suppose that had a medical career not been expectedly lucrative, or did not involve social prestige, or prevented you from living nearby, or did not make you the envy of your friends, your parents would have been unwilling to assume costs to hold you up in your decision to pursue a medical career. Or suppose that had they been uncertain that that a career in medicine was indeed a good idea for you, they would have been unwilling to assume costs to hold you up in your decision to pursue a medical career. Even if there is a sense in which they can be said to be supporting your decision, they are not exercising the virtue of being supportive with respect to your decision to pursue a medical career, since their willingness to bear costs to hold you up is conditional on such factors in this way. To exercise the virtue of being supportive of your decision to pursue a medical career (as opposed to merely supporting it), it must be the case that their willingness to bear costs to hold you up would continue to be realized across a range of non-actual circumstances, including those in which they are less than confident that your decision is choiceworthy.

I've been describing the modally demanding requirements of the virtue of being supportive in the case of supporting someone's self-expressive *decision*. What about supporting someone in a self-expressive *domain*, such as career or love or friendship or family arrangement? Here the virtue of being supportive is modally demanding in a somewhat different way. Return to the case involving your deliberations about career pursuit. Suppose that had you not chosen to pursue a career in medicine but a different career instead, your parents would have been unwilling to bear costs to

¹⁰ We can contrast these modally demanding values to modally *undemanding* values, like pleasure. Pleasure is a modally undemanding value because it is enough for the value of pleasure to be instantiated that people actually have certain phenomenal experience.

hold you up (in suitably relevant and comparable respects) in your pursuit of *that* career. They would not then be exercising the virtue of being supportive with respect to *the domain of your professional ambition* (the particular domain of career or professional choice), if their willingness to bear costs to hold you up is only conditional on your actually choosing to pursue medicine. To instantiate the virtue of being supportive of you in this domain, it must be the case that they would continue to be willing to bear costs to hold you up across a range of non-actual circumstances in which the profession you choose to pursue is not medicine, but something else (say, education, public service, law, academia, non profit, performing art, and so on).¹¹ Included in these other possible professions are those that they do not believe (or fall short of fully believing) is choiceworthy.

To summarize: To possess the virtue of being supportive (of someone's self-expressive decision or someone's domain of self-expressive choice), it is not enough to simply possess the willingness to bear costs to hold the other up actually; it must also be the case that one would continue to have a willingness to bear costs to hold the other up across a range of non-actual circumstances.

Faith's role in the virtue of being supportive

In the previous section, I characterized the virtue of being supportive in modally demanding terms, arguing that it involves a willingness or readiness to take on risks/costs to hold the other up in their project actually, as well as across a range of non-actual (or possible) situations. This range of possible situations includes *some in which (by the putative supporter's lights) there is not enough evidence to be certain that our intimate's self-expressive project is likely to add to the goodness or choiceworthiness of their lives*. I shall now argue that we can think of the willingness to take on costs to hold the intimate up in *these* situations as faith. If this is right, then faith is an important element in constituting the virtue's modally demanding character.

To make the case that faith is an element of the virtue of being supportive, I will draw on Lara Buchak's account of faith (Buchak 2012). According to Buchak:

A person has faith that X, expressed by A, if and only if that person performs act A when there is some alternative act B such that he strictly prefers A&X to B&X and he strictly prefers B&~X to A&~X, and the person prefers {to commit to A before he examines additional evidence} rather than {to postpone his decision about A until he examines additional evidence}. (Buchak 2012)

Note that this is (in the first instance) an account of *propositional* faith—the sort of faith expressed in statements containing a *that*-clause: faith *that* a felon who has served his time is trustworthy, faith *that* a friend one confides in is loyal, faith *that* God exists, faith *that* the criminal justice system is not discriminatory, etc.¹² Buchak's account relates faith not just to some *proposition*, but also to an *action* that

¹¹ The relevant non-actual circumstances needn't be likely or highly probable.

¹² On propositional faith, see Howard-Snyder (2013).

expresses (one's faith in) the proposition. In her words, "I propose, then, to make faith that X, expressed by A *the basic unit of analysis*, where X is a proposition and A is an act..." (Buchak 2012, my emphasis).

Her account also connects one's faith to one's *preferences* (which are tied to *dispositions to act*). We can understand this connection by considering Buchak's claim that faith does not require *believing* some proposition but *acquiescing* to it. She distinguishes acquiescing and believing as follows:

I speak of acquiescing to a proposition rather than believing it because I am not sure that if I have faith in something, I thereby believe it. While it sounds infelicitous to say 'I believe that $\sim X$ but I have faith that X', there may not be anything wrong with saying 'I don't know whether X—I have no idea whether I believe that X or not—but I have faith that X'. So as not to prejudge that issue, I make a weaker claim: that having faith involves taking the proposition to be true, that is, 'going along with it', but not necessarily adopting an attitude we might describe as belief.

Having faith that X (where X is a proposition), thus, does not entail adopting an attitude of *belief* toward X, but rather an attitude of *acquiescence*.

Acquiescing to a proposition is, in turn, connected to one's *preferences*. Consider an example, adapted from Buchak's discussion. Suppose you are deliberating whether to tell a friend a secret. It matters to you that your friend keeps your secret: there are risks/costs to you of having your secret revealed by your friend. If you decide to tell the secret to your friend, your doing so may involve having faith that your friend will keep your secret. Or, equivalently, your action may involve having faith that your friend is *trustworthy*, where this just means *disposed to keep your secret*. (Your friend's *not* being trustworthy, then, is just her *not* being disposed to keep your secret.)

Using Buchak's locution, we could say that the *act* of telling your friend your secret may *express* (*your faith in*) *the proposition* that your friend is trustworthy. And you have *faith* that your friend is trustworthy, if and only if you have the following preferences:

- (i) You prefer the combination of (telling your friend the secret *and* your friend is trustworthy) to (not telling your friend the secret *and* your friend is trustworthy), and
- (ii) You prefer the combination of (not telling your friend the secret *and* your friend is not trustworthy) to (telling your friend the secret *and* your friend is not trustworthy), and
- (iii) You prefer to act now rather than wait on additional evidence.

Let me comment on (iii). For Buchak, faith involves a preference to act (to do something that expresses one's faith in a proposition) *without needing to further examine additional evidence that could potentially bear on the relevant proposition*. Consider an example Buchak provides to motivate her conception:

If a man has faith that his spouse isn't cheating, this seems to rule out his hiring a private investigator, opening her mail, or even striking up a

conversation with her boss to check that she really was working late last night—that is, it rules out conducting an inquiry to verify that his spouse isn't cheating. If he does any of these things, then she can rightfully complain that he didn't have faith in her, even if she realizes that, given his evidence, he should not assign degree of belief 1 to her constancy [i.e., even if he couldn't be 100% sure that she's been faithful].

Thus, faith requires a willingness or commitment to act on a proposition—to act *as if* some proposition is true—while also refraining from gathering evidence for the purpose of checking whether it is true.¹³

Let us apply Buchak's account to the case of faith that an intimate's self-expressive pursuit(s) is choiceworthy, which I take to be an element of the virtue of being supportive. If one has faith that one's friend's self-expressive pursuit is choiceworthy, then one possesses a willingness to act *as if* one's intimate's self-expressive pursuit is actually choiceworthy—is actually worth pursuing, will actually promote the goodness of her life—while also refraining from gathering evidence to settle the question whether it is indeed worth pursuing. That is, it is not a condition on one's acting (lending support) that one wait for more evidence in favor of the conclusion that one's friend's project is choiceworthy. For practical purposes, that question is already settled.¹⁴

Moreover, the kind of faith at issue does not require having an attitude of belief toward the proposition that one's friend's self-expressive pursuit is choiceworthy. It does not require one to actually believe that it is choiceworthy—indeed, one may be quite uncertain that it is choiceworthy.¹⁵ But it does require acquiescing to the proposition, insofar as one is willing to act in ways that express one's faith in the proposition. Shouldering burdens or taking on costs to hold up one's friend's in their self-expressive pursuit can be an act that expresses one's faith that the friend's self-expressive pursuit is choiceworthy.

In other words, supporting one's friend can be an act of faith.¹⁶ To see this, suppose you are considering supporting your friend in his self-expressive pursuit, say, by giving him a loan to start a small business. Given the risks of giving him your loan (for example, contributing to a project that makes your friend miserable, his life worse, etc.), your action of supporting your friend might involve faith of a certain sort. Let us suppose supporting your friend *expresses* the proposition (in which you have faith) that his project is choiceworthy. It will involve faith that your

¹³ Faith needn't be something that one maintains despite evidence to the contrary. Of course, where one has overwhelming evidence that an intimate's project is not choiceworthy, it may not be possible to have faith that the project is choiceworthy.

¹⁴ The fact that no more evidence is sought by one for the purpose of determining how to act does not mean that one must be closed off from further evidence. It needn't mean engaging in denial or self-deception.

¹⁵ It is also possible to support someone in their self-expressive pursuit while being certain that it is *not* choiceworthy. Here support would not be based on faith.

¹⁶ Buchak characterizes *acts of faith* as follows: "A person performs an act of faith (or acts on faith) if and only if he performs some act A such that there is a proposition X in which he has faith, expressed by A." (see Buchak 2012).

friend's project is choiceworthy, as expressed by the action of supporting your friend (giving him the loan) if the following is true:

- (i) You prefer (supporting your friend *and* having the self-expressive pursuit be choiceworthy) to (not supporting your friend *and* having the self-expressive pursuit be choiceworthy),
- (ii) You prefer (not supporting your friend *and* not having the self-expressive pursuit be choiceworthy) to (supporting your friend *and* not having the self-expressive pursuit be choiceworthy), and
- (iii) You prefer to act (supporting your friend) now rather than to wait and gather additional evidence.

Recall that the virtue of being supportive involves a willingness or readiness to take on risks/costs to hold the other up in their project across a range of possible situations, including *those in which (by the putative supporter's lights) there is not enough evidence to be certain that one's intimate's self-expressive project is likely to be choiceworthy*. It is faith of the sort with the structure just described that accounts for the willingness or readiness on the part of the virtuous supporter to act in these situations to hold the other up—to act as if one's intimate's chosen self-expressive pursuit is choiceworthy and refrain from examining further evidence to determine whether it actually is.¹⁷

The special goods of faith-based virtuous support: autonomy and solidarity

Having characterized the virtue of being supportive as a modally demanding value (in “[The virtue of being supportive](#)” section) and having just argued that faith is an element of the virtue (in “[Faith's role in the virtue of being supportive](#)” section), I shall now argue that faith—through its role in the virtue of being supportive—has the power to: (1) enable the supported party to enjoy a more meaningful exercise of agency in self-expressive arenas, and (2) engender a sense of unity between ourselves and the supported party, deepening the normative and emotional bonds of the relationship.

Consider the idea of autonomy understood as the capacity to determine the shape of one's life, to be the author of it. Autonomy so understood admits of degrees and requires the ability to exercise one's agency and the opportunity to do so. By

¹⁷ One might wonder why I have focused on *propositional* faith (faith-that) rather than *objectual* faith (faith-in) as the sort of faith that helps to constitute the virtue of being supportive. It may be that faith in one's intimate (or, more precisely, faith in one's intimate's ability to select or pursue a choiceworthy project) helps to constitute the virtue of being supportive. But faith in a person or faith in a person's ability would still typically require acquiescing to certain propositions about that person. For example, faith in a friend's ability to select a choiceworthy project would involve acquiescing to the claim that the friend's self-expressive pursuit the friend is choiceworthy. For this reason, I focus on propositional faith, but acknowledge the controversy in the claim that objectual faith entails propositional faith. (On the distinction between objectual faith and propositional faith, see Howard-Snyder 2016.) Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this point.

agency, I mean the capacities to canvass and weigh reasons, form intentions and plans, and carry them out. One has the *opportunity* to exercise one's agency, only if one is free from others' coercion, manipulation, and other agency-undermining forms of influence. Moreover, the relevant notion of opportunity also depends on having what Joseph Raz calls 'an adequate range of options'. (On Raz's conception of autonomy as 'an ideal of self-creation,' see Raz 1986, Chap. 14.) What matters for 'adequacy' is not the number of options, but that there be a wide enough range of available significant options, conceived of as individually worthy but mutually incompatible alternatives.

How does the virtue of being supportive further autonomy thus understood? Suppose you are the young adult mentioned earlier, deliberating what to do with your life: you are deciding what career or profession to pursue, and among the options you are considering is medicine. Why would it matter for it to be the case that, not only would your parents shoulder burdens to hold you up should you decide to pursue medicine, but that they too would shoulder burdens to hold you up across a range of *other* options, including those in which *they* are unconvinced that what you've chosen is worthwhile? What difference would it make to your deliberations for it to be the case that should you decide to pursue, say, philosophy (rather than medicine), your parents would shoulder costs to hold you up *on faith*?

I submit that you will not feel *as free* to choose what you really want to do, in the alternative in which pursuing medicine is the only option where your parents would be willing to shoulder costs to hold you up. Here, your parent's preference regarding your choice is liable to exert pressure on your deliberations in a way that involves loss. Their willingness to bear costs to hold you up only if you make a particular choice (based on their judgment of what's choiceworthy for you) makes it harder for you to deliberate more purely on the basis of the reasons most centrally relevant to the choiceworthiness of the various options for you. These reasons include considerations tied to: your interests, talents, and temperament, and how well they suit the options before you; the distinctive goods associated with the various career options; the potential costs of pursuing each option in terms of employment prospects, future income, geographic location; and so on.) Rather than focusing attention on *these* reasons, you overly focus on the consideration that your parents are only willing to shoulder burdens to hold you up in the case where you choose medicine. This shift in focus *distorts* your deliberations and decision in the domain of career choice. (On the importance of having an opportunity to make significant decisions for the reasons most relevant to the choiceworthiness of self-expressive pursuits, see Tsai 2014).

On the other hand, when our intimates support us on faith, they allow us to enjoy a freer experimental space to engage with greater meaning and autonomy with the reasons and values in these domains. Supportive friends and lovers enable us a richer opportunity to engage these reasons and values more purely and directly, without being overly distracted by the potential external costs to them of our decisions. In this way, faith-based support facilitates autonomy by shielding the considerations of external costs from dominating and distorting one's experience of value.

It is also worth registering that many of the activities, projects, and relationships that have self-expressive significance have a dimension of risk. They often expose us to dangers: depending on how the chips fall, one may be seriously harmed or worse off as a result of pursuing something genuinely worth pursuing. When we enjoy the modally demanding support of one's intimates in a self-expressive domain, we are more protected against the vulnerability tied up with the pursuit of meaningful activities, projects, and relationships. (On the idea that participation in valuable intimate relationships involves vulnerability essentially, see Tsai 2016. On the idea that valuing involves emotional vulnerability, see Scheffler 2012.) Such faith-based support provides one with the kind of assurance and peace of mind expressed by the thought: 'Were things to go seriously wrong for me, I wouldn't be on my own to deal with it.' Knowing that a friend or lover is prepared to assume costs to hold me up under various contingencies thus provides a kind of security—some degree of freedom from anxiety that is a further condition of the meaningful exercise of autonomous agency. In sum, the willingness to bear costs to hold up one's intimate across a range of possible self-expressive pursuits respects and enables autonomy, for it acknowledges that each of us should play the central part in making our own lives, and provides us with greater security.

I turn now to solidarity in a relationship. Being supportive is a way of expressing solidarity but it also promotes solidarity. The willingness to take on costs to hold an intimate up in their project, and do so on the basis of faith that the project is choiceworthy, can strengthen the fabric of intimate relationships. By *relational solidarity*, I mean a sense of unity or oneness between members in a relationship. Relational solidarity has both affective and normative aspects: it involves attitudes and responses such as empathy, sympathy, and trust; and it involves certain reasons or obligations. When A is willing to support B on the basis of faith, this generates solidarity between A and B in ways that involve both aspects, by: (1) generating cooperative feelings and emotional bonds between A and B, and (2) strengthening the normative fabric of the relationship through the creation of reasons for A and B that each may not have otherwise in the absence of support.

When I exercise the virtue of being supportive with respect to your self-expressive pursuit, I display acceptance of your identity and agency in a way that will tend to give rise to fellow feelings between us. My willingness to hold you up across a range of possibilities will likely generate affection and cooperative attitudes like trust. This affection-generating dynamic is explained partly by our social nature: by the fact that we are social creatures who care immensely about the attitudes others (especially those with whom we stand in close relations) take toward us, including their recognition of our self-conception and respect of our agency. (Strawson 1974 observed that we are the kinds of beings that care immensely about the quality of will others display towards us.)

In addition to promoting mutual and reciprocated emotional bonds between us, faith-based support can *by itself* constitute a strengthening of the normative bonds of our relationship. Independent of what warm feelings are generated, my commitment to supporting you on faith generates reasons for me to bear costs to hold you up, reasons that I may not otherwise have. (On the creation of reasons through commitment, see Chang 2013; Raz 1986, Chap. 14.) That faith-based support is able

to strengthen the normative fabric of a relationship through the creation of reasons is due to the processes of identification with, or commitment to, the other's projects that support involves. Consider the connection between commitment and reasons: In committing myself to something (supporting you), I *create* reasons to follow through on my commitment. These additional reasons are suggested by the fact that failure to follow through on one's commitments will entail a loss of integrity. In supporting you, I put my agency behind you in a way that generates (additional) reasons for me to respond and act in ways to hold you up and assume costs on your behalf. You will in turn have reasons to respond and act in various ways toward me (for example, out of gratitude, reciprocity) in virtue of my actions and responses toward you in being supportive. Thus, the lives of friends, lovers, and family members become more deeply normatively intertwined when they are robustly supportive of one another. This deepening of normative interconnectedness is a second way in which faith-based support generates unity or solidarity between the members of the relationship.

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