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# The Obligation to Resist Oppression

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In 1944, the year after the Great Bengal Famine, 45.6% of widowers surveyed ranked their health as either "ill" or "indifferent." Only 2.5% of widows made the same judgement. This subjective ranking belied their actual situations, because as a group the widows' basic health and nutrition tended to be particularly abysmal. These women were starving, and yet most of them claimed not to be sick. One explanation for this unwarranted stoicism is that, unlike men who were similarly situated, these women reacted to the scarcity of food by coming to believe that what little food there was should not be wasted on them.[1] Amartya Sen has argued that the reason the Bengali women formed these desires while the men did not is that they had already internalized prevalent sexist social mores that granted women's interests less importance than men's.[2] Because these women did not believe their interests mattered as much as others', they did not experience their starvation as worth complaining about.

It is a terrible thing that, to satisfy the less dire needs of the men around them, these women were willing to give up the food that they needed to live. And it is a terrible thing that this happened because these women came to believe that their own needs were unimportant when compared with those of men. But I also think that the women have something to answer for. Rather than standing up for themselves, they accepted starvation. And, when they were being conditioned by sexist social norms to think that this was right, they did not (or did not effectively) reject this idea. In short, while these women were terribly wronged by an oppressive society, they also wronged themselves by failing to resist this oppression.

That it is wrong to oppress others, to take the food they need or deny them the social conditions necessary for the self-respect they deserve, is hardly controversial.[3] But that those who are oppressed can also do wrong in not resisting their oppression is rather more so.[4] In this paper I defend this controversial claim: I argue that people have an obligation to resist their own oppression and that this obligation is rooted in an obligation to protect their rational nature. First, I present a Kantian account of the obligation to resist one's oppression as an obligation oppressed people have to protect their rational nature; next, I defend this Kantian account by demonstrating some of the ways oppression can harm people's rational nature; and finally, I show how the obligation to resist one's oppression need not be as overly onerous as it might initially appear to be.

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## I. The Obligation to Resist One's Oppression

The usual reason to think that someone's acquiescence in her or his oppression is morally problematic is other-oriented: by acquiescing in oppression, one might argue, someone is at least failing to help, and quite possibly actually *harming*, other people.[5] This idea has merit. After all, no one is oppressed in a social vacuum. The extent to which an individual goes along with her own oppression typically affects the oppression of others who share her social category. Accepting one's oppression can make oppression appear acceptable, or, even worse, it can make oppression appear not to be oppression at all.[6] And doing this is no better than endorsing oppression: sending the message that it is permissible to treat me in these ways in virtue of my being a woman sends the message that it is permissible to treat others in these ways in virtue of their being women, too.

But there is also a self-directed account of the obligation to resist one's oppression: someone who is oppressed should stick up for herself, you might think, because, by acquiescing in her oppression, she is behaving in a way that is wrong regardless of how others are affected.

It is a well-known feature of Kant's practical philosophy that he argues for obligations to the self as well as to others. Kant has been highly influential on this point; most contemporary philosophers who write about self-respect do so within the Kantian tradition.[7] Kant's case for our obligations to ourselves, like his case for our obligations to others, begins with the value of our rational nature. Kant's argument for why rational nature in general is valuable relies on his second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, also known as the Formula of Humanity. This formulation of the Categorical Imperative famously commands you to "Act so that you use humanity in your own person, as well as in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." (*G* 4:429)[8] The ground, or explanatory justification, of this moral principle, according to Kant, is that "[r]ational nature exists as an end in itself." (*G* 4:429) Kant says that insofar as we are rational we must conceive of ourselves as having a rational nature, and we must recognize that our rational nature confers upon us a value that requires that we always be treated as an end and never merely as a means. That is, insofar as we are rational we must view our rational nature as conferring on us a value that restricts the ways we may be treated. The obligation of self-respect, then, is an obligation to recognize the value of the rational nature within us and to respond accordingly. This obligation is an instance of the more general obligation to respect rational nature, wherever one finds it.

By far the most prominent Kantian account of why people have an obligation to recognize the value of their rational nature and to respond appropriately to that value is found in Thomas Hill's "Servility and Self-Respect."[9] Hill argues that an individual fails to respect herself insofar as she fails to acknowledge that she has certain basic moral rights or insofar as she fails to value these rights properly; he calls such a person "servile." What is morally objectionable about servility is that

it involves a public and systematic willingness to disavow one's moral status and this, Hill argues, is incompatible with a proper regard for morality. While the most obvious instances of a lack of respect for morality tend to involve violating the rights of others, the servile person's lack of respect for morality lies in her acting in ways that demonstrate that she either does not know or does not care about her own status as a moral equal. The moral failing of servility, then, is that one fails to fulfill the obligation of self-respect by failing to properly respect one's equal status under the moral law. Regardless of whether any particular case of servility is blameworthy, Hill thinks it is morally objectionable, "at least in the sense that it ought to be discouraged, that social conditions which nourish it should be reformed, and the like."[10] And, insofar as servile behavior represents a failure of the obligation of self-respect, Hill seems to imply that servile people have an obligation to change their behavior. But, while Hill recognizes that servility is a moral failing, he does not come out and say explicitly that people have an obligation to resist this moral failing.

Although I am deeply sympathetic to Hill's account, the account that I defend here differs from his in several respects. One difference has to do with their relative scopes: because Hill's focus is on servility rather than oppression, his account will apply to a different class of cases than mine. This is because it is possible for there to be both cases of acquiescing in one's oppression that do not involve servility and cases of servility that do not involve acquiescing in one's oppression. The problems of servility and acquiescing in one's oppression are closely related, to be sure, but the two are conceptually distinct. Another difference between our accounts is that mine attempts to flesh out what respecting rational nature actually requires of us in a way that Hill's does not. If you focus, as Hill does, exclusively on how acquiescing in one's oppression is a failure to respect the value of one's rational nature, then you might overlook some of the concrete ways one's rational nature can actually be *harmed* by this acquiescence. These are moral harms that deserve to be taken very seriously. For this reason, I argue that once we recognize that rational nature can be harmed by oppression we will see there is an obligation not merely to *respect* rational nature but also to *protect* it. Hill's focus is on the *attitudes* one must have toward rational nature; my focus is on the particular *actions* one must take to actually protect this nature.

So I want to tell a somewhat different story, but one that also draws heavily from Kant. I argue that if Kant is right and our rational nature has ultimate value, then we ought to protect this nature by protecting all of it, including our capacity to act rationally. Oppression can harm rational capacities in a number of ways, we will see. Because one has an obligation to prevent harm to one's rational nature, and because oppression can harm one's capacity to act rationally, one has an obligation to resist one's oppression.[11] What I am doing here is applying the Kantian obligation to respect rational nature in ways that have not been recognized before. In identifying the possibility that oppression can harm people's rational capacities, I have uncovered a new class of instances that the general Kantian obligation to respect rational nature can be applied to. This application should be

of special interest to feminist theorists, and to any others interested in oppression more generally.

Of the various things that might be controversial about this line of thought, one that might stand out at this point is the claim that oppression harms one's capacity to act rationally (or at least often does so in familiar contexts of oppression). The goal of what comes next, then, is to show how oppression does this—how it harms oppressed people's capacity to act rationally.

## II. How Oppression Harms Rational Nature

Departing somewhat from many interpretations of Kant, I contend that we should think of our capacity for practical rationality as an ordinary human capacity, as susceptible to harm as many other human capacities. Our capacity for practical rationality can be harmed when damage is done either to our capacities to form reasonable practically relevant beliefs, to our capacities to form reasonable—that is, consistent—intentions on the basis of these beliefs, or to our capacities to practically deliberate from beliefs to intentions. Our capacity for practical rationality can also be harmed when we face illegitimate restrictions on the full and proper exercise of these capacities. For clarity's sake, I will refer to the former sort of harm—when one's rational capacities are prevented from functioning in a way that also threatens their future functioning—as *damage* to one's rational nature and the latter sort of harm—when one encounters an unfair temporary interference with the full exercise of one's rational capacities—as a *restriction* on one's rational nature. The line between these two sorts of harm will not always be completely clear, but this vagueness is unimportant given our purposes here because both sorts of harm are seriously morally problematic.

Now, if development through childhood builds our rational capacities, and trauma or neglect tears them down, then why not think that other forces are capable of affecting them as well? Oppression is one such force, I argue: it can damage someone's rational capacities so thoroughly that her ability to act rationally is severely, sometimes permanently, compromised. And oppressed people face restrictions on their ability to exercise their rational capacities even more frequently than they face full-fledged damage to these capacities. There are a number of different ways that oppression can affect our capacity for practical rationality. I discuss several of them next. You need not agree with me about each of these harms provided that you agree with me that oppression harms our capacity for practical rationality in some way or other. Still, I think it is worth getting a good sense of the range of different ways oppression can be harmful.

### *1. Oppression Can Cause Self-Deception*

A classic form of practical irrationality occurs when someone acts irrationally because she is deceiving herself. Oppression can cause self-deceptive behavior because oppressive social systems create incentives for oppressed people to

believe certain falsehoods about themselves, contrary to their own evidence. A particularly interesting example of this is given by Elizabeth Anderson, who shows how contradictory sexist norms of femininity and sexuality can cause women to become "radically self-deceived" about their motivations for some of their actions.[12] Anderson focuses on the case of women who seek abortions after having failed to use contraception. Despite not wanting to become pregnant, these women do not use contraception, Anderson argues, because doing so would force them to see themselves as "sexually active, receptive to sexual advances from strange men, taking sexual initiatives, [and] exercising agency with respect to their sexual choices."[13] And these women do not want to see themselves in these ways because they are in the grip of other norms of femininity that are inconsistent with this picture of sexual agency. These women are "caught between contradictory norms of femininity: one that tells them it isn't nice to have sex without intimacy; another that tells them it isn't nice to refuse their date's sexual demands unless they have a good excuse; [they are thus] heteronomous agents self-destructively caught between contradictory external norms."[14] To put the point more concretely, these women deceive themselves about the likelihood that they will have sex and so do not take steps to provide for contraception. But this is irrational behavior, as they do not want to become pregnant and they also do not take abortion to be as good a method for dealing with unwanted pregnancy as contraception. And this irrational behavior is evidence that these women have undergone harm to their rational nature.

### *2. Oppression Can Harm Capacities for Rational Deliberation*

Another way oppression can harm people's capacity to act rationally is by harming their capacities for rational deliberation. This sort of harm can affect someone's capacity for determining which means will allow her to achieve the ends she has set, or it can affect her capacity for determining which ends to set in the first place.[15]

Harm to someone's capacity for instrumental rational deliberation could result, for example, from depriving her of the basic educational resources needed at key developmental stages to fully develop these skills.[16] This sort of harm could also result from the long-term cognitive damage that results from malnutrition—something possibly experienced by some of the Bengali women we considered earlier—or, in extreme cases, from language deprivation in early childhood. Members of oppressed groups are significantly more likely to be deprived of these various resources. The terror or trauma oppressed people can experience when they face violence, or even the threat of violence, can also impair their rational capacities. Harm to rational capacities can also result when someone is institutionalized, medicated, or lobotomized, or from extreme cases of depression. Oppressed people are more likely to face such adversities.[17]

Harm to an oppressed person's capacity to use means–ends reasoning could result if her independence is not fostered: if someone is always dependent on

others to do things for her, her ability to figure out how to do things for herself can become impaired. If the means to your ends must always be to ask someone else to do it for you because you are unable to do it yourself, this could eventually permanently impair your capacity to determine how to do things on your own. And even in cases where one's rational capacities are not permanently damaged, insofar as this lack of independence places unfair limits on the means that are available to someone in the pursuit of her ends it is a restriction on the exercise of these capacities. When oppression takes the form of infantilization, these harms can happen all too easily.

Harm to someone's rational capacity to choose certain valuable ends in the first place can result from oppression because oppression can make it less likely that the oppressed will imagine or conceive of various choices as live options for people like them. This happens, for example, when someone internalizes social roles that rule out various lifestyle choices as inappropriate or undesirable for people like her. This process involves what theorists have called *internalized oppression*.[18] Internalized oppression occurs when people come to believe, and so actually endorse, the social norms and stereotypes that are responsible for their oppression. Oppressive stereotypes can make other people believe that oppressed people are inferior in their rational capacities, and can thus make others treat them as such. But oppressive stereotypes can also make oppressed people themselves believe that they are inferior in this way, and can thus make oppressed people either treat themselves as such or accept such treatment from others. Internalized oppression can function as a self-fulfilling prophecy: an oppressed person can become what everyone already believes her to be. Internalized oppression can make oppressed people subject to the phenomenon of *sour grapes*: just as when the fox realizes that he cannot get the grapes he desires and so decides that they are sour, oppressed people can respond to the recognition that many worthwhile ends are outside their grasp by rejecting the value of those ends and deciding not to set them for themselves.[19] Internalized oppression can damage or restrict people's sense of self-worth, so they do not set certain worthwhile ends for themselves because they do not think they deserve them. In a related manner, when an oppressed person has internalized the belief that she is inferior to others, she can be more likely to set ends that fail to protect her future well-being; such ends, many philosophers think, are irrational because it is a requirement of practical reason that people have prudential regard for their future well-being.[20]

### *3. Oppression Can Cause Weakness of Will*

Weakness of will—*akrasia*—is a matter of deciding what one has reason to do in a given situation, deciding to do it, but then doing something else instead because one has given in to countervailing pressures that have been brought on by various non-rational considerations. One way oppression might cause someone to do this turns on the self-fulfilling prophecies that can result when people who are oppressed internalize derogatory stereotypes that depict people like them as lazy

or impetuous or irresponsible. Someone who has internalized such stereotypes just might not hold herself to very high standards of rationality and thus might be more susceptible to succumbing to weakness of will in various circumstances. If you know that others expect people like you to succumb to certain temptations, you might eventually come to expect yourself to succumb, and it can be that much harder to resist such temptations when they arise.

Another example of how oppression can cause weakness of will can be found in the case of abortion-seeking women we considered earlier. At least some of these women consent to unwanted sex, Anderson claims, because they cannot see how to say "no." One explanation of what has gone on here is that they suffer from weakness of will inculcated by having internalized social norms that fail to teach women to stand up for themselves. These women recognize that they have good reason to refrain from having sex but succumb to their partners' sexual demands nevertheless. And engaging in this irrational behavior is evidence that their rational nature has been harmed in some way.

## III. An Objection from Standpoint Theory

Before moving on, I would like to briefly consider an objection that is motivated by certain concerns that standpoint theorists have raised. The central insight behind standpoint theory is what Alison Wylie has called an *inversion thesis*:

> those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects. They may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience.[21]

This inversion thesis suggests that people who live at the margins of society—people who are oppressed in virtue of, say, their class, race, gender, or sexual orientation—are actually better situated to know certain things. These people's marginalization makes them likely be discredited epistemically because they are often seen to be uneducated, or uninformed, or unreliable. But marginalization can actually confer epistemic advantage, standpoint theorists argue. Living one's life at the margins of society can put someone in a position to know things that more privileged people usually do not know, or things they have a vested interest in not knowing, or things they have a vested interest in systematically ignoring or denying. This is especially true when it comes to knowledge about oppressive social structures: because oppressed people do not have an interest in maintaining an oppressive status quo, it is easier for them to understand how oppression works.

Given the considerations brought to light by standpoint theorists, then, you might think that my account has things exactly backward. I have argued, remember, that the reason people have an obligation to resist their oppression is that oppression harms people's rational capacities. This harm can make oppressed

people act in practically irrational ways. But, if you take standpoint theory seriously, you might think it is not the members of *oppressed* groups who are in danger of acting irrationally; it is the members of *oppressor* groups.[22] Furthermore, it might be charged that because my account focuses on the ways oppression can damage people's rational capacities, it is, in effect, guilty of carrying on the tradition of epistemically discrediting people who are oppressed.

To respond to these objections, I want to emphasize certain clarifications of standpoint theory that theorists such as Wylie have been careful to articulate. Early standpoint theorists often said things to suggest that marginalized standpoints are *universally* epistemically advantaged.[23] But it is a mistake, Wylie claims, to think that the epistemic advantages of marginalization are automatic, or that they are all-encompassing. While not denying that the marginalization that results from oppression can confer certain epistemic advantages, Wylie points out that oppression can sometimes put people at an epistemic disadvantage as well. Oppressed people often lack access to formal education, for example, and this deprivation can affect the kinds of information they have access to, the kinds of theoretical or explanatory tools they have at their disposal, and their ability to develop various analytical reasoning skills. Many of the harms to oppressed people's rational capacities discussed above can also be understood as examples of the ways that oppression can put oppressed people at an epistemic disadvantage, I contend. There are, in short, things that oppressed people will not be able to know because of the effects of oppression on their rational capacities.

In agreeing with Wylie here, I am perhaps ultimately just reasserting my claim that oppression harms people's rational capacities. But I am also insisting that this claim is not in conflict with the tenets of standpoint theory, properly understood. Standpoint theorists need not exaggerate the epistemic advantages of oppression. Focusing on the ways oppression harms oppressed people's rational capacities risks contributing to the tradition of epistemically discrediting these people, I will admit. But this is a risk I am willing to take, for the only alternative is to pretend that these harms are not really there. Ignoring these harms will not make them go away. But identifying them, and working to eradicate them, might.

## IV. Imperfect Duties and An Objection from Demandingness

We have just seen that oppression can damage or restrict one's capacity for practical rationality, and thus harm one's rational nature, in a number of ways. Because there is an obligation to protect one's rational nature, in cases where oppression harms rational nature, one has an obligation to protect oneself from these harms. But what exactly does this obligation require? In most familiar circumstances, the most practical way to protect one's rational nature from the harms of oppression is to *resist* one's oppression. So what is someone obligated to do when she is obligated to resist her own oppression, and when is she so obligated? Just how demanding is this obligation? Given the moral seriousness of

these harms, there is good reason to think that someone is obligated to resist her oppression whenever she is oppressed. But, if this is the case, then, given the ubiquity of oppression and the resilience of the systems that produce it, the obligation to resist one's own oppression would be very demanding. Probably too demanding, in fact.

There is a real concern, I concede, that my account might be guilty of demanding too much of people. We just cannot be obligated to resist our oppression at *every available opportunity*, the thought might be. Nor can we be obligated to do *whatever it takes* to resist oppression. In many oppressive contexts, actively resisting oppression can be dangerous or counterproductive: resistance can be exhausting, victimizing, and can subject someone to retribution from others. In these sorts of cases, it looks like *not* resisting your oppression is a better way to protect your rational capacities from oppression's harms than resisting it is. In other cases, resistance might simply be impossible—given the ubiquity of oppression, it is probably not logistically possible to resist its every manifestation; given the severity of some oppressive harms, a victim might be rendered incapable of resistance; given the social nature of oppression, resistance might require the cooperation of others who are unwilling to help;[24] given the mystification of oppression, someone might not even realize she is oppressed[25]—and, as we all well know, if someone *cannot* do something then it cannot be that she *ought* to do it. And in virtually every case, defending an obligation to resist oppression seems to be tantamount to blaming the victim: if there is an obligation to resist oppression, after all, then it seems that those who fail to resist their oppression will be the appropriate subjects of blame.[26] Finally, as we saw above, one might argue that resisting one's oppression is supererogatory rather than obligatory: resisting one's own oppression is heroic, certainly, but it is simply not reasonable to say that failing to resist makes someone immoral or blameworthy. To address these various lines of objection, in what follows I argue that the obligation to resist one's own oppression is an *imperfect duty* and that, as a result, someone is not obligated to do whatever it takes to resist her oppression; and it might be that she is not obligated to resist at every available opportunity either.

As we will see, there are many different forms that resistance to oppression can take. Thinking about the obligation to resist one's oppression in this way—as an obligation that can be fulfilled by more than one kind of action—makes the obligation what Kantians call an *imperfect duty*.[27] The distinguishing characteristic of imperfect duties is that they permit a wider range of acceptable actions in fulfilling them than is the case for perfect duties.[28] This is because (unlike perfect duties) imperfect duties are not, strictly speaking, duties to perform specific *actions*. Rather, imperfect duties are duties to adopt certain *general maxims*, or principles of action. These maxims can be satisfied by more than one action. Imperfect duties thus allow a latitude of choice that perfect duties do not. To say that the duty to resist one's oppression is imperfect, however, is not to suggest that it is less stringent or less important than other duties. Instead, calling this duty imperfect means there is a strict duty to set the end of resisting one's own

oppression, but there can be more than one way to go about pursuing this end. What the imperfect duty to resist one's oppression rules out is the refusal to do anything to resist one's oppression. That is, it rules out acquiescing in one's own oppression.

*That* imperfect duties permit latitude in action is not a matter of dispute. But exactly *how much* and *what kind* of latitude these duties have is very much up in the air. Imperfect duties "cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act" (*DV* 6:390) but is there *nothing* we can say about the specific actions prescribed by the different imperfect duties? Imperfect duties "cannot specify precisely . . . how much one is to do" (*DV* 6:390), but is there *nothing* we can say about how often we have to act or how much we have to do to fulfill them? Kant is, unfortunately, less clear than one might like about how best to characterize imperfect duties. But what is clear is that there is no general story to be told about the latitude that various imperfect duties have. Instead, we have to look at the duties individually: different imperfect duties have different kinds and degrees of latitude.

In what follows, I will focus on two different kinds of latitude in action that can be permitted by imperfect duties.[29] One kind of latitude someone might have is latitude to decide between various different ways of acting in a particular situation to satisfy the maxim required by an imperfect duty. Call this kind of latitude *latitude in which action to take*. Someone could fulfill the imperfect duty to be beneficent, for example, by working at a soup kitchen or by donating to Planned Parenthood or by giving used clothing to the Goodwill. The duty of beneficence does not require any of these acts in particular; it just requires that one do *something* that is beneficent. Because imperfect duties are duties to adopt general maxims, not duties to perform specific actions, all imperfect duties permit this kind of latitude. A second kind of latitude someone might have is latitude to choose either to perform or to refrain from performing an action on a particular occasion, so long as she stands ready to perform the given sort of action on at least some other occasions. Call this kind of latitude *latitude in refraining from action*. Someone could count as fulfilling the imperfect duty to be beneficent, for example, even if she refrained from performing all of the above-mentioned beneficent actions on a given occasion, as long as she does not always refrain from acting beneficently. The question here, then, is whether, and to what extent, the imperfect duty to resist oppression permits these two different kinds of latitude.

## V. Latitude in Which Action to Take

What are the different sorts of actions one could take to fulfill the obligation to resist oppression? One could resist oppression by participating in some form of *activism* intended to engage with and ultimately change the social norms, roles, and institutions that make up an oppressive system. In at least some cases, for example, oppressed people can directly confront the individual people who are actively oppressing them. Oppressed people can often also give time or money to

organizations that are dedicated to dismantling oppressive social institutions. Sometimes oppressed people can both empower themselves and undermine the effectiveness of oppressive social roles by reappropriating derogatory stereotypes or language—people have attempted to do this (not uncontroversially[30]) with words like "bitch," "nigger," and "faggot." And in some cases oppressed people can take part in oppressive social institutions in ways that demonstrate that such institutions need not necessarily be oppressive—one could, for example, enter into a marriage of mutual respect (one where both partners were committed to ensuring that each partner had an equal opportunity to pursue meaningful life projects and that the inevitable sacrifices and compromises of family life did not unfairly disadvantage one partner over the other) and thereby show that the institution of marriage itself is not necessarily oppressive, even if its most conventional forms function to entrench sexist oppression.

Another way to resist oppression is to *opt out* of oppressive social norms, roles, and institutions. Oppressed people could boycott an oppressive institution, for example. Or they could opt out of oppressive social norms by refusing to conform to conventional modes of dress or behavior—as, for example, when someone refuses to identify with conventional gender norms and instead presents herself as androgynous or as the opposite gender of what she has been assigned according to her sex. Another option for oppressed people is to isolate themselves from their oppressors to foster solidarity with other members of their oppressed group—this sort of opting out could be as radical as lesbian separatism or as moderate as creating a women's-only space on a college campus. Opting out can also occur when oppressed people refuse to behave in ways considered to be appropriate for members of their social group—when women are assertive, confident, or opinionated, for example. (Opting out like this can be particularly effective for women, as many of the kinds of practical irrationality to which many women are especially prone in virtue of their oppression are those that involve a lack of confidence, or a lack of willingness to make a scene, or a lack of willingness to make someone else uncomfortable.)

Both engaging in activism and opting out are *external* forms of resisting oppression. But resistance to oppression could be *internal* as well: someone could, at least theoretically, fulfill the obligation to respect her rational nature by becoming the sort of person whose rational nature was simply not damaged by oppression. An oppressed person could build up mental walls against many of the harms to her rational nature threatened by oppression. She could educate herself about the potential risks of these harms and be wary of their effects. She could simply refuse to believe what oppressive social messages are telling her about the character or worth of people like her. Insofar as these and other forms of internal resistance succeed in protecting one's rational capacities from the harms of oppression, they would qualify as actions that successfully fulfill the obligation to resist one's oppression. And insofar as these and other forms of internal resistance manifest self-respect, they are probably morally required for other reasons as well.[31]

In some cases, when every other form of resistance would subject her to harm (or the serious risk of harm), some form of internal resistance might be the only resistance that is available to an oppressed person. The Bengali widows we saw earlier could be an example of this sort of case. If these women were to stand up for themselves—by, say, vocally demanding their fair share of the limited resources available to them—they could be perceived as disobedient or unruly and could face retribution from people keen to remind them of their place. They could risk beatings, expulsion from their community, even murder. Their external actions could subject their children to these risks. If risks like these are attached to resisting externally, one has very good reason to not resist externally. But even if these women would be risking harm by resisting oppression externally, they could still tell themselves that they *deserve* the food they are giving up as much as anyone else does and that their survival is as important as anyone else's.

In some cases, there might be nothing an oppressed person can do to resist her oppression other than simply *recognizing that something is wrong* with her situation. This is, in a profound sense, better than nothing. It means she has not acquiesced to the innumerable forces that are conspiring to convince her that she is the sort of person who has no right to expect better. It means she recognizes that her lot in life is neither justified nor inevitable. There is something importantly self-respecting about engaging in internal resistance, and the possibility of this sort of resistance captures the intuition that there are actions someone can engage in to fulfill the duty to resist oppression even when external resistance is imprudent or impossible.

Admittedly, in many cases it might be difficult to tell whether someone is resisting her oppression internally. Consider the following example.[32] In his essay "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All," David Foster Wallace describes his visit to the Illinois State Fair for *Harper's* magazine.[33] While his friend—who he calls "Native Companion" because she is a local—is riding one of the fair's rides the men operating the ride stop it as she is upside down so that her dress falls over her head and they can "ogl[e] her nethers."[34] What follows is the exchange that takes place between Wallace and Native Companion immediately after she gets off the ride.

> Wallace asks, "Did you sense something kind of sexual-harassmentish going on through that whole little sick exercise?"
>
> "Oh for fuck's sake . . . it was *fun*."
>
> "They were looking up your *dress*. You couldn't see them, maybe. They hung you upside down at a great height and made your dress fall up and *ogled* you. They shaded their eyes and made comments to each other. I saw the whole thing."
>
> "Oh for fuck's sake."
>
> "So this doesn't bother you? As a Midwesterner, you're unbothered? Or did you just not have an accurate sense of what was going on back there?"
>
> "So if I noticed or I didn't, why does it have to be *my* deal? What, because there's assholes in the world I don't get to ride on The Zipper? I don't get to ever spin?

> Maybe I shouldn't ever go to the pool or ever get all girled up, just out of fear of assholes?" . . .
>
> "So I'm curious, then, about what it would have taken back there, say, to have gotten you to lodge some sort of complaint with the Fair's management."
>
> "You're so fucking *innocent* . . . ," she says. "Assholes are just assholes. What's getting hot and bothered going to do about it except keep me from getting to have fun?" . . .
>
> "This is potentially key. . . . This may be just the sort of regional politico-sexual contrast the swanky East-Coast magazine is keen for. The core value informing a kind of willed politico-sexual stoicism on your part is your prototypically Midwestern appreciation of fun . . . whereas on the East Coast, politico-sexual indignation *is* the fun. In New York, a woman who'd been hung upside down and ogled would go get a whole lot of other women together and there'd be this frenzy of politico-sexual indignation. They'd confront the ogler. File an injunction. Management'd find itself litigating expensively—violation of a woman's right to nonharassed fun. I'm telling you. Personal and political fun merge somewhere just east of Cleveland, for women." . . .
>
> "They might ought to try just climbing on and spinning and ignoring assholes and saying Fuck 'em. That's pretty much all you can do with assholes."[35]

Is Native Companion on to something here? Does she have no obligation whatsoever to resist her oppression in this situation? Or, by refusing to let the carnies get to her, might we say that she is actually resisting her oppression internally? We could argue that by refusing to feel humiliated, by refusing to let the carnies dictate to her when and how she can have fun, and by refusing to believe that their sexually objectifying her demeans her moral status as a person in any way, Native Companion is protecting her rational capacities from the harms of oppression and so is, in effect, resisting her oppression internally. This is a plausible interpretation of what has gone on in this situation, I think. Native Companion is portrayed in this story as someone who is feisty, confident, and self-secure; there is every reason to think she is the sort of person whose rational capacities are not endangered by an isolated incident of sexual harassment.

But an alternative interpretation of what has gone on here that is just as plausible, I think, is that Native Companion is exhibiting either bad faith or ignorance resulting from internalized oppression. She might be unaware of how the systematic nature of oppression means that its harms are likelier to occur corrosively than discretely and thus that the full extent of its harms are never appreciable when looking only at isolated incidents.[36] She might resist characterizing herself as oppressed because she does not want to think of herself as a victim or the men in her life as victimizers. She might be unwilling to give up the few benefits afforded to her by the oppressive status quo.[37] She might have simply accepted the sexist status quo—a status quo where men are free to objectify and harass women and face relatively few consequences—as not merely inevitable but actually not unjust. Native Companion's hypothetical ignorance or bad faith here might be blameless.[38] But she would be mistaken, nevertheless. If this interpretation of the situation is the right one, then Native Companion is not resisting her

oppression internally by refusing to let the carnies get under her skin. Rather, she is exhibiting exactly the bad faith or ignorance that we should expect of someone in her circumstances.

The point here is that the very nature of oppression can make it difficult or impossible to tell whether someone is resisting internally or is acquiescing. So, if the only resistance someone is putting up is internal, we might have no way to know whether she is fulfilling the obligation to resist her oppression. There will be a fact of the matter here, but we might not have access to it.[39] Notice that this possibility holds not just when attempting to determine whether someone else is resisting her oppression; it also holds when attempting to determine whether we ourselves are resisting. You might think that you are resisting your oppression internally—or, if, like Native Companion, you are not inclined to think about things in terms of oppression, you might think you are being self-respecting or some such thing—but you could be fooling yourself. You could be engaging in *self-deception*: one of the forms of practical irrationality encouraged by oppression. This oppressive harm to our rational capacities can make it difficult to know whether we are fulfilling the obligation to resist oppression if we only resist internally. This gives us good reason to err on the side of caution, to not necessarily trust our gut when we think we are resisting internally, and to resist oppression externally whenever possible, to be sure we are successfully fulfilling this obligation.

Furthermore, internal resistance might be able to protect one's rational nature from the harms of oppression, but it would leave oppressive social structures intact. As I said above, there are good reasons to think that someone who is oppressed has obligations to other members of her oppressed group to not acquiesce in oppressive social structures, even if these structures are not currently harming her personally. This means that internal resistance, even if successful in protecting one's own rational nature, would usually be insufficient to fulfill *every* moral obligation of resistance an oppressed person has.

On top of all this, I think it is psychologically implausible to suggest that successfully protecting one's rational nature solely by means of engaging in internal resistance is a live possibility for most oppressed people. Most people's psychologies are simply not oppression-proof. This is why the harms of oppression are so extensive. So, again, while the obligation to respect one's rational nature in the face of oppressive harms could theoretically be satisfied solely by resisting oppression internally rather than externally, there are epistemic, moral, and practical reasons to think that in all but the most extreme cases some degree of external resistance to oppression will remain necessary.

Insofar as these different forms of resistance—internal and external—function to protect one's rational nature while destabilizing or undermining oppressive social structures, they all count as resisting one's oppression. They are thus *sufficient* to fulfill the obligation to resist one's own oppression. (By calling these actions "sufficient" I do not mean to imply that someone merely has to perform one of them and then she will have successfully fulfilled her obligation to resist her oppression and can go on her merry way and never have to bother

resisting ever again. Rather, I mean that they count as one sort of action which, when performed in conjunction with other actions of this sort, successfully fulfill this obligation.) But are any of these forms of resistance *necessary*? Does the obligation to resist one's oppression *require* any of these actions? I contend that, while each of these actions counts as resisting one's oppression, none of these actions in particular is required by the obligation to resist.

## VI. Latitude in Refraining from Action

We have just seen that the imperfect duty to resist oppression permits a great deal of latitude in which action one can take to fulfill it. The question now is whether this obligation ever permits latitude in refraining from acting at all. All imperfect duties have the kind of latitude just discussed: because they are specified quite generally, there will always be more than one action someone can undertake to fulfill an imperfect duty. But some imperfect duties also have a different kind of latitude: it is sometimes permissible to refrain from acting to fulfill some imperfect duties, as long as one does not refrain all the time. The paradigm cases of imperfect duty found in Kant—beneficence and developing one's talents—have this kind of latitude (*DV* 6:392–94, 444–46). But Kant thinks other imperfect duties—respecting others and increasing one's moral perfection—do not have this latitude (*DV* 6:393–94, 446–47). The question here, then, is whether the imperfect duty to resist one's oppression has this kind of latitude. The question is whether, just as someone counts as fulfilling the duty of beneficence even if she does not act to fulfill this duty at every available opportunity, someone counts as fulfilling the duty of resisting her oppression if she does not act to fulfill this duty at every available opportunity. The question, in other words, is whether it is permissible to sometimes sit by and let oneself be oppressed.

To see why a Kantian might think the imperfect duty to resist one's oppression should permit latitude in refraining from action, think for a moment about the erosive effects of water dripping on stone. Just as individual droplets of water that seem not to have any effect on a piece of stone can cumulatively wear a piece of stone away, rational nature can be harmed in almost invisible increments. So too for oppression: what might seem to be merely the harmless slights or annoyances or inconveniences of oppression can have a cumulative effect on people's rational nature. This analogy illustrates not only how the effects of oppression are as likely to be gradual and cumulative as they are discrete; it also presents us with a case for arguing that people are not obligated to resist *every* instance of their oppression. If you have a piece of stone that has to be protected only from *detectable* erosion, then you obviously cannot let water run over it for any period of time, but any individual drop splashing on it here and there will probably not be a problem so long as you are careful to not let it happen for too long or too often. So too for the corrosive effects of oppression on one's rational nature: many individual instances of oppression can be borne without discernibly harming one's rational nature, but

eventually they will accumulate and discernible harm will occur. This means that the obligation to protect one's rational nature from being harmed by oppression could allow one to refrain from resisting at least once in a while. Because rational nature is so valuable, one needs to err on the side of caution, obviously, and be careful to not let the corrosive effects of oppression accumulate. But it is compatible with an obligation to protect one's rational nature to occasionally fail to resist individual instances of oppression that would end up harming one's rational nature were one to fail to resist them all the time. None of us is so fragile that we cannot bear the stress of an occasional instance of oppression.

This result suggests that the obligation to resist one's oppression might permit at least some latitude in refraining from action. Remember, imperfect duties are duties to adopt a general principle of action, not duties to perform a particular action; this generality means that one can fulfill some imperfect duties without necessarily acting on them at every available opportunity. And it looks like the obligation to resist one's oppression might allow this sort of latitude: someone can protect her rational nature, and thus fulfill the obligation to protect it, without resisting her oppression at every opportunity, so long as she does not do this so often that the corrosive effects of oppression are allowed to accumulate. This means, for example, that someone like Native Companion could, on occasion, be morally permitted to not do everything in her power to resist her oppression. She could be morally permitted to do nothing in this instance: she could not bother confronting the carnies, and even not bother reporting the incident to their boss. If the erosion analogy is apt, it turns out that "climbing on and spinning and ignoring assholes and saying Fuck'em,"[40] might be okay, at least once in a while. Maybe sometimes it is true that this is "pretty much all you can do with assholes."[41] The erosion analogy suggests that Native Companion's imperfect duty to resist her oppression should permit her at least some latitude in refraining from action.

To be clear, what this duty does not permit her to do is resist so rarely that the harms of oppression accumulate and damage her rational nature. Because rational nature is so fundamentally valuable, the duty to protect it by resisting one's oppression would obviously have less of this sort of latitude than imperfect duties like the duty of beneficence and the duty to develop one's talents. But unlike, say, the imperfect duty to increase one's moral perfection, which Kant says permits no latitude in refraining from action, it is possible that the imperfect duty to resist one's oppression *could* permit *some* latitude in refraining from action. And, to be clear, this latitude is a possibility because the obligation here is not merely to *respect* one's rational nature, but to *protect* it.

To determine whether the obligation to resist oppression should permit latitude in refraining from action, we need to examine why Kant thinks some other imperfect duties permit this latitude. Kant points out that there are countless ways to fulfill the imperfect duties of beneficence and of developing one's talents, and so we must recognize that our finite, limited nature forces us to choose among these options. It is simply impossible to pursue all the different ways we might develop our talents, and if we were to attempt to pursue every one of them we

would fail to succeed at developing any of our talents at all. So too for beneficence: we could not successfully act beneficently were we to attempt to help every single other person achieve their ends in every instance. These two imperfect duties permit latitude in refraining from action because the possibility of successfully fulfilling them actually *requires* not acting at every available opportunity. The imperfect duties of respecting others and increasing our moral perfection, on the other hand, do not permit latitude in refraining from action because it *is* possible to successfully fulfill them while acting at every available opportunity.

Is the obligation to resist one's oppression like this? Is it impossible to fulfill this obligation if we must act on it at every available opportunity? What most strongly motivates the attractiveness of thinking that the obligation to resist oppression should permit latitude in refraining from action, I think, is the recognition that there are situations where resisting one's oppression in the wrong way can be dangerous (or at least counterproductive). Because certain actions taken to protect rational capacities can be dangerous or counterproductive if they are taken all the time or in the wrong circumstances, *refraining* from acting to protect one's rational capacities might actually be the best way to *protect* them in certain circumstances. Fair enough. But, I claim, it would be a mistake to categorize the latitude in question here as latitude in refraining from action. This is because the explanation for why someone is not required to *act* (or is permitted to not act) in these sorts of circumstances is that successfully fulfilling the duty to protect one's rational capacities requires (or permits) that one *not act* in these circumstances. One's failure to act here is thus actually better described as a failure to act *outwardly* or *externally*. One is still acting, in the relevant sense. One has still set the maxim to protect one's rational capacities, and one's behavior is still in accord with this maxim. It is just that in these circumstances the best way to achieve this end is to refrain from doing anything outward. One recognizes this, and acts accordingly. One is, in short, resisting one's oppression *internally*. It is latitude in which action to take to fulfill the duty to protect rational capacities—the *other* kind of latitude—that explains why one is required (or permitted) to fulfill this duty by refraining from acting externally in these circumstances. Were this to be a case of latitude in refraining from action, one would set the maxim to protect her rational capacities, recognize that the best way to achieve this end in these circumstances would be to take a certain course of action, but then *refrain* from taking this course of action. And that is not what one has done here.

The possibility of internal resistance means that, unlike the imperfect duties of beneficence and developing one's talents, practical considerations do not make the obligation to resist one's oppression impossible to fulfill if acted on at every opportunity. Perhaps this should lead us to say that because internal resistance is always a possibility the duty to resist oppression permits *no* latitude in refraining from action.

But why, exactly, must we say that the duty to resist oppression always requires at least internal resistance? Why can we not say that refraining from even internal resistance is sometimes permissible? The erosion analogy establishes as a

possibility that there could be cases where someone may not have to do *anything* to resist her oppression, remember, because it shows that many individual instances of oppression can be borne without discernibly damaging one's rational nature. But, given that we can account for the most intuitive cases of when it seems that resistance should not be required with the possibility of engaging in internal resistance, I think the burden of proof is on the person who wants to claim that not even internal resistance is required in a given circumstance. Notice that any argument attempting to claim that not even internal resistance is required in a given circumstance is, in effect, going to be an argument for why someone does not have to be self-respecting in this circumstance. This will not be an easy argument to make. Saying, "I just don't feel like it," or, "It's just not that big a deal," is nowhere near sufficient to establish that one should not have to be self-respecting.

Think again of the other imperfect duties that permit latitude in refraining from action. Even when one permissibly refrains from engaging in a particular action that would fulfill the imperfect duties to be beneficent or to develop one's talents, one must retain a latent recognition that engaging in such an action is a possibility for oneself and that insofar as it would fulfill the duty it would be a good thing to do. One must not deny that such an action would fulfill the duty (even if someone chooses to not volunteer at a soup kitchen she must be willing to recognize that doing so would fulfill the duty of beneficence). And, importantly, one must not deny that the duty is important and that one remains subject to it (even if someone chooses not to be beneficent in this particular instance she must be willing to recognize that beneficence is important and that she is still bound by the duty of beneficence).

So, if the obligation to resist one's oppression permits latitude in refraining from action, someone who avails herself of this latitude must still be willing to recognize the importance of the obligation to protect her rational nature from the harms of oppression. She must recognize that she remains subject to this obligation. And she must recognize that various actions are open to her to fulfill this obligation, and that they would be good to do, even if she chooses not to engage in them in a particular instance.

Take the case of Native Companion. If her expressed desire to do nothing to resist her oppression at the hands of the carnies is actually a form of internal resistance—perhaps because she recognizes on some level that being required to mount external resistance to every situation like this would be exhausting or victimizing—then she is in the clear. She is fulfilling the duty to protect her rational nature by reserving her energy for more important matters. She is respecting herself by resisting her oppression internally. If, on the other hand, by doing nothing to resist her oppression she is actually refraining from engaging in any sort of resistance, then if this is to be a permissible instance of latitude in refraining from action she must be willing to uphold the importance of resisting oppression, she must recognize that she is subject to the obligation to resist oppression, and she must recognize that the actions she is choosing to not engage

in would count as fulfilling this obligation. So if Native Companion wants to do nothing here because she is unwilling to recognize that she has been subject to oppression, because she is unwilling to recognize that she has an obligation to resist her oppression, or because she is unwilling to recognize the importance of resisting oppression, then this is not a permissible instance of latitude in refraining from action and she has not fulfilled the obligation to resist her oppression. If these are her reasons for refraining from action in this oppressive situation, she is likely to make a similar judgement about the permissibility of refraining from action in other oppressive situations. Taking claims such as, "I just don't feel like it," or, "It's just not that big a deal," to be good reasons to refrain from action is evidence that one does not properly appreciate the gravity of the situation; it is evidence that one does not properly appreciate the value of her rational nature or does not properly appreciate the risks her rational nature faces under oppression. And failing to appreciate this will inevitably lead to harms to one's rational capacities. Refraining from internal resistance is thus likely to result in erosive harms to one's rational nature because it is likely that an unwillingness to resist oppression at least internally manifests either a lack of appreciation of the seriousness of the moral harms of oppression, or, worse, a lack of self-respect. Cases where one is permitted latitude in refraining from at least internal resistance will thus be exceedingly rare.

In spite of the evocativeness of the erosion analogy, it is extremely difficult to find practical cases where the imperfect duty to resist one's oppression actually permits latitude in refraining from action. Here is one final possibility. Notice, first, that claiming that someone is obligated to resist her oppression seems to require that she is aware of her oppression and of the harm that it poses to her rational nature. What does this mean, one might ask, for cases where someone does not have this knowledge? Does ignorance of one's oppression vitiate the obligation to resist it?[42] Given that when someone has internalized her oppression her ability to recognize that she is oppressed can be severely impaired, ignorance of one's oppression is likely to be exceedingly common. Perhaps we should say that these are the sorts of cases where the obligation to resist permits latitude in refraining from action: if someone does not know that she is oppressed, then surely she should not have to act to fulfill the obligation to resist her oppression. If the obligation to resist oppression demanded otherwise, it would be exceedingly onerous.

But we must be careful here. I do think we should say that at least some of the people who are ignorant of their oppression should not have to resist it. But to say that someone who is ignorant of her oppression "should not have to resist it" does not necessarily mean that she is not *obligated* to resist. It might mean, instead, that she has an *excuse* for failing to fulfill this obligation. I contend that the obligation to resist one's oppression exists whether someone is aware of her oppression or not.[43] Ignorance of one's oppression can, however, affect whether someone is *blameworthy* for failing to fulfill the obligation to resist. This is a familiar moral phenomenon—when an agent does something wrong but, for one reason or

another, we do not hold her morally responsible for her offense—and it shows that failing to fulfill the obligation to resist one's oppression does not necessarily mean that one is blameworthy for such a failure. To be clear: the latitude in refraining from action that characterizes some imperfect duties does not amount to permission to fail to fulfill these duties in situations where one *should* fulfill them. So we should not try to explain failures to fulfill the obligation to resist oppression that result from ignorance as permissible instances of latitude in refraining from action. Instead, we should explain failures to resist that result from nonculpable ignorance as cases of nonculpable failure to fulfill the obligation, and failures to resist that result from culpable ignorance as cases of culpable failure to fulfill the obligation. So, for example, if Native Companion's ignorance of her oppression is not her fault, then neither is it her fault that she fails to resist this oppression. But her lack of blameworthiness for failing to fulfill this obligation does not mean the obligation itself goes away. It just means she should not be held morally responsible for her failure to fulfill it.

The erosion analogy shows that it might be compatible with an obligation to protect one's rational nature to occasionally fail to resist individual instances of oppression that would end up harming one's rational nature were one to fail to resist them all the time. But I think it is clear that if the erosion analogy is apt it gets us a really quite limited amount of latitude in refraining from action: because rational nature is so fundamentally valuable one needs to be very careful to not let the corrosive effects of oppression accumulate. This discussion emphasizes just how little latitude in refraining from action this duty should permit. Because the most compelling cases that seem to require latitude in refraining from action are actually addressed by the possibility of internal resistance, even if this duty does permit some of this latitude there is not much reason to want it to permit much of it. Still, because there are many different ways to protect our rational capacities in oppressive contexts, and thus many different actions that count as fulfilling the obligation to protect them, this obligation permits a great deal of latitude in which action to take.

## VII. Conclusion

My goal here, remember, was to show that oppressed people have an obligation to resist their oppression. I set out to do this by first defending the Kantian tenet that says that the fundamental moral importance of our rational nature means we have an obligation to protect it from harm. Then I showed how the systemic harms of oppression can damage people's rational natures, and showed how this often happens in nearly invisible increments. And so, I argued, under oppressive social circumstances the obligation to protect our rational nature translates into an obligation to resist oppression. And, if we understand this obligation as one that permits different kinds of latitude in action, we need not worry that imposing it on oppressed people would be too onerous.

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## Notes

[1] There might be other ways of explaining the results of this survey; I am merely speculating that the Bengali women held these beliefs about their relative worth. But, given that at least some oppressed people do internalize their oppression in this way—and, as we will see, this phenomenon is so ubiquitous that most people internalize at least some aspects of their oppression—this speculation is unfortunately neither unreasonable nor unrealistic. There is a philosophical issue here, I contend, regardless of whether my speculations are right in this particular case.

[2] Amartya Sen, "Gender Inequality and Theories of Justice," in *Women, Culture, and Development*, ed. Jonathan Glover and Martha Nussbaum (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 259–74, and Amartya Sen, "Rights and Capabilities," in *Resources, Values, and Development* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 307–24. For an influential discussion of these results, see Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 139.

[3] According to the definition I favor, an individual is oppressed if and only if (i) she is unjustly harmed in a group-specific way, where this sort of harm has occurred if and only if (a) she is harmed in virtue of being a member of a group, G; and, (b) on balance, members of G have a relative lack of social esteem, power, or authority; and, (c) on balance, members of another group, G*, benefit from her being harmed; and, (d) this harm is unfair, unearned, or illegitimate in some other way; and, (ii) this harm is part of a structural and systemic network of social institutions. Furthermore, while the harms of oppression are most often the unintentional result of an interrelated system of social norms and institutions, some oppressive harms are the result of the intentional actions of an individual person. (Sally Haslanger's distinction between structural and agent oppression captures these two kinds of oppression. See Sally Haslanger, "Oppressions: Racial and Other," *Racism, Philosophy and Mind: Philosophical Explanations of Racism and Its Implications,* ed. Michael Levine and Tamas Pataki. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[4] This is not to suggest that it is *worse* to fail to resist one's own oppression than it is to oppress others. I mean only to argue that it is a moral failing to fail to resist one's own oppression.

[5] For example, Ann Cudd argues that what is wrong when women acquiesce in their own oppression is that doing so strengthens sexist institutions that harm all women. But Cudd resists the conclusion that the oppressed have a *general* obligation to resist their own oppression; she argues that in many cases resisting one's oppression is *supererogatory*. The only time someone who is oppressed *does* have an obligation to resist her oppression, Cudd thinks, is when she has chosen to acquiesce in her oppression and this acquiescence harms *other* members of her oppressed group. See Ann Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 198–200.

[6] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this second point.

[7] Most notably, Stephen Darwall, Robin Dillon, and Thomas Hill have all defended conceptions of self-respect that are heavily influenced by Kant. See Steven Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect,"

*Ethics* 88 (1977): 36–49; Robin Dillon, "Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political," *Ethics* 107 (1997): 226–39; Robin Dillon, "How to Lose Your Self-Respect," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1992): 125–39; Robin Dillon, "Toward a Feminist Conception of Self-Respect," *Hypatia* 7 (1992): 52–69; Thomas Hill, "Self-Respect Reconsidered," *Tulane Studies in Philosophy* 31 (1982): 129–37; and Thomas Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect," *The Monist* 57 (1973): 87–104.

[8] Immanuel Kant *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). "*G*" in parenthetical documentation hereafter refers to this work.

[9] Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect." Cited earlier in note 7.

[10] Ibid., 95.

[11] One objection to this line of argument is that if oppression harms rational nature, and if the value of rational nature is what grounds the obligation to resist oppression, then a person whose rational nature has been harmed by oppression will at some point no longer be obligated to resist it. The worry is that failing to fulfill the obligation to protect one's rational nature from the harms of oppression might actually vitiate future instances of this obligation. I respond to this concern in another paper, where I defend a novel interpretation of Kant's views on the relation between the value we have and the respect we are owed. I argue, contra the received view among Kant scholars, that the feature in virtue of which someone has intrinsic value is not the same feature in virtue of which she is owed the respect that constrains how she may be treated (by herself or others). So, even though someone who fails to resist her own oppression fails to respect herself in the right way, and even though this moral failing does make her lose a certain kind of value, her obligations to respect herself and to resist her oppression do not go away. (See my "Respect-Worthiness and Dignity," currently under review.)

[12] Elizabeth Anderson, "Should Feminists Reject Rational Choice Theory?" in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, ed. Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2002), 369–97.

[13] Ibid., 385.

[14] Ibid., 386.

[15] In characterizing rationality as a matter that concerns not merely the means one uses to achieve one's ends, but also what one's ends themselves are, I am committing myself to the view that certain ends are intrinsically rational and others intrinsically irrational. For an account of how this sort of reason can be involved in determining what ends we set, see Henry Richardson, *Practical Reasoning About Final Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). One implication of committing myself to this view is that my account of rationality is set apart from those that would equate rationality with adaptive behavior. Such adaptive accounts of rationality would suggest that members of the oppressed act rationally when they "play along" with their own subjugation. The ethical point I would like to advance, however, maintains that such complicity can compromise our rationality by undermining our capacity to set ends for ourselves and to pursue these ends in a purposeful manner.

[16] There is evidence to suggest that various factors that bear on people's capacity for rational deliberation—things such as people's talents and their ability to see the value in delayed gratification—are highly dependent on education or training in one way or another. See, for example, Janet Currie, "Early Childhood Education Programs," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 15 (2001): 213–38; Janet Currie and Duncan Thomas, "Does Head Start Make a Difference?" *American Economic Review* 85 (1995): 341–64; Edward Zigler and Sally J. Styfco, ed., *The Head Start Debates*, (Baltimore: Brookes, 2004). For evidence that what is generally thought of as inborn talent is often actually highly socially determined, see Karl Anders Ericsson., ed., *Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[17] For example, performing the kind of work that women are traditionally held responsible for—work such as routine, repetitive housework—is associated with higher rates of depression. See, for example, Rosalind C. Barnett and Yu-Chu C. Shen, "Gender, High- and Low-Schedule-Control Housework Tasks, and Psychological Distress," *Journal of Family Issues* 18 (1997): 403–28;

Jennifer Glass and Tetshushi Fukimoto, "Housework, Paid Work, and Depression among Husbands and Wives," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 35 (1994): 179–91; Reed W. Larsen, Maryse H. Richards, and Maureen Perry-Jenkins, "Divergent Worlds: The Daily Emotional Experience of Mothers and Fathers in the Domestic and Public Spheres," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67 (1994): 1034–46. For discussions of how being oppressed increases one's likelihood of institutionalization, see, for example, Robert T. Roth and Judith Lerner, "Sex-Based Discrimination in the Mental Institutionalization of Women," *California Law Review* 62 (1974): 789–815; Licia Carlson, "Cognitive Ableism and Disability Studies: Feminist Reflections on the History of Mental Retardation," *Hypatia* 16 (2001): 124–46; Licia Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

[18] For an account of the psychological effects of internalized sexist oppression, see Sandra Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression," in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 22–32.

[19] For a discussion of how the phenomenon of sour grapes can affect one's capacity for rational deliberation, see John Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[20] See, for example, Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

[21] Alison Wylie, "Why Standpoint Matters," in *Science and Other Cultures: Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology*, ed. Robert Figueroa and Sandra Harding (London: Routledge, 2003), 339.

[22] Thanks to members of the audiences at the University of Dayton's 2008 Richard R. Baker Colloquium on the topic of "Building Coalitions Across Difference," and the Society for Analytical Feminism's 2008 conference at the University of Kentucky, for raising versions of this objection.

[23] Marxist standpoint theorists, for example, argued that one's social position with respect to material labor necessarily determines one's epistemic position, and the marginalized position of the proletariat gives them epistemic advantages over the bourgeoisie because their ability to understand their exploitation is not clouded by a motivation to maintain a status quo from which they do not benefit. Feminist standpoint theorists such as Nancy Hartsock, for example, argued that women's experiences surrounding childrearing and other forms of domestic labor result in epistemic perspectives that are systematically different between men and women, and that women's is one that universally confers epistemic advantages in understanding patriarchal institutions. See Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and the Philosophy of Science,* ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1983), 283–310.

[24] Ann Cudd's discussion of how an individual worker's actions will not count as striking unless others join her is an example of this sort of case. See Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 199. Cited earlier in note 5.

[25] For a discussion of how the reality of psychological oppression can be systematically obscured from its victims, see Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression." Cited earlier in note 18.

[26] Anita Superson, for example, argues that women who acquiesce in their oppression by conforming to patriarchal gender roles ought not to be blamed for this acquiescence because blaming them would be tantamount to blaming the victim. See Anita Superson, "Right-Wing Women: Causes, Choices, and Blaming the Victim," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 24 (1993): 40–61. Jean Harvey provides a nuanced discussion of when blaming a victim of oppression is morally objectionable. See Jean Harvey, *Civilized Oppression* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

[27] To be clear, insofar as the duty to resist one's oppression is a duty to protect one's rational nature, I do not think Kant himself would characterize this duty as imperfect. In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, for example, he says that we have a perfect duty to ourselves to preserve our animal nature, that is, to avoid "*depriving* oneself (permanently or temporarily) of one's *capacity* for the natural (and so indirectly for the moral) *use* of one's powers (*DV* 6:421)." Nevertheless, while Kant himself

would characterize this duty as perfect, I hope to make a case for a Kant*ian* to be able to characterize it as imperfect. See Immanuel Kant *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 1797, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). "*DV*" in parenthetical documentation hereafter refers to this work.

[28] Kant says imperfect duties leave "a [wiggle-room] (*latitudo*) for free choice in following (complying with) the law, that is, that the law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act and how much one is to do by the action for an end that is also a duty" (*DV* 6:390).

[29] Thomas Hill's account of the different kinds of latitude that could be permitted by Kant's imperfect duties is probably the best accepted in the literature. The two kinds of latitude I focus on here are both articulated by Hill. See Thomas Hill, "Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation," in *Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 147–75.

[30] There are a number of reasons why this way of resisting oppression could be problematic. One is that attempts at reappropriation might just *reinforce* derogatory stereotypes. Another is that it might be difficult to tell whether someone has really reappropriated derogatory stereotypes, or whether they have merely *internalized* (and thus endorsed) them. A third is that the use of epithets like these might be harmful to other members of the oppressed groups who are either not aware of, or take issue with, the ironic way in which the terms are being used. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for these suggestions.

[31] Especially given that I defend the possibility that resistance can be internal as well as external, you might find it surprising that my account makes no reference to the concept of autonomy. After all, protecting our capacity to act rationally amounts to protecting our capacity to act autonomously, and there is a vast philosophical literature that discusses this concept. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this.) Given how wide and varied this literature is, given that the concept of autonomy is open to a dizzying number of definitions and interpretations in this literature, and given that I think my arguments here can be made convincingly without opening this particular can of worms, I have chosen to avoid discussing the concept in this paper.

[32] I have discussed this example elsewhere as well. See my "Whether to Ignore Them and Spin: Moral Obligations to Resist Sexual Harassment," *Hypatia* 20 (2005): 94–108. There, I argued that women have an obligation to confront the men who sexually harass them. This paper was a preliminary exploration of some of the main issues that motivate this project; as should be apparent, I now think the conclusion I defended there is wrong on various points of detail.

[33] David Foster Wallace, "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997), 83–137.

[34] Ibid., 99.

[35] Ibid., 101.

[36] Marilyn Frye illustrates the systematic nature of sexist oppression with an analogy to a birdcage; she points out that if you only ever look at a birdcage one wire at a time, you will never see how such a structure could limit the mobility of its occupant. You will just assume that the bird could pick itself up, dust itself off, and fly around the wire in its way. But, if you were to step back and look at all of the wires of a birdcage together, you would see an interconnected system of barriers that function collectively to restrict the bird's freedom. Analogously, it can be hard to recognize people's oppression if you focus exclusively on any particular social, political, or economic institution or even if you focus exclusively on any particular restriction or frustration or instance of harm. Taken by themselves, these sorts of things can seem innocuous—not really capable of limiting someone's freedom in terribly profound or important ways. You will just assume that any given person should be able to pick herself up, dust herself off, and get on with her life in just the way anyone unlucky enough to be faced with a random setback would. Frye's analogy suggests that it is only when you step back and look at the system of social, political, and economic institutions as a whole that you can see how it functions to oppress people. See Marilyn Frye, "Oppression," in *The Politics of Reality* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1983), 4–5.

[37] The concern that oppressive social systems can be perpetuated because they afford oppressed people some (usually inauthentic) benefits has been raised by Simone de Beauvoir, among others. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshely (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1984 [1949]).

[38] Anita Superson, for example, has argued that expecting women to recognize the full extent of their oppression is to expect them to be "visionary." This is an unreasonable and unfair expectation, Superson argues, because sexism can infect virtually every aspect of their lives in a patriarchal society. See Anita Superson, "Right-Wing Women," cited earlier in note 26, and "Deformed Desires and Informed Desire Tests," *Hypatia* 20 (2005): 109–26.

[39] To be clear: this is an epistemic point about whether we can know that internal resistance has taken place, not a metaphysical point about whether internal resistance has in fact taken place.

[40] Wallace, "Getting Away," 101.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for pressing me to answer versions of this question.

[43] This insistence might make the obligation to resist an unfair one, but, as I have argued elsewhere, an unfair obligation is an obligation nevertheless. See my "Whether to Ignore Them and Spin: Moral Obligations to Resist Sexual Harassment," cited earlier in note 32.