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Oppressive Fear
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Abstract

This paper explores some of the ways that fear can be both a manifestation of and major contributor to oppression. It argues for a pluralistic account of the reasons that justify feeling fear or working to let go of fear and provides a framework to grapple fruitfully with the question of when someone should work to let go of fear and work to avoid contributing to the fear of others. Part 1 argues that emotions are an appropriate target of moral evaluation; we are often not only responsible for our outwardly observable actions, but also for our emotional lives. It then details six different criteria by which we can engage in such evaluation. Part 2 evaluates fear in particular, in light of its relationship to oppressive ideologies and social structures. Part 3 explores some of the ways that people ought to respond to oppressive fear, in light of the relation they bear to it.

When should someone feel afraid? When should they work to let go of fear? How does fear contribute to oppression, either for the person who feels it, or for others? In this project I am concerned with the way that fear can be both a manifestation of and major contributor to oppression. My aim is to provide a framework that enables us to grapple fruitfully with those difficult questions. I'll proceed in three parts.

In part 1, I'll briefly argue that emotions are an appropriate target of moral evaluation; we are often not only responsible for our outwardly observable actions, but also for our emotional lives. I'll then detail six different criteria by which we can engage in such evaluation. In part 2, I will evaluate fear in particular, in light of its relationship to oppressive ideologies and social structures. In part 3, I will explore some of the ways that people ought to respond to oppressive fear, in light of the relation they bear to it.

I will argue for a pluralistic account of the reasons that justify feeling fear or working to let go of fear. That means that any one of the reasons that I explore might weigh most heavily in favor of or against feeling fear in any particular case.[2] In adopting such a pluralistic account I am rejecting a one-size-fits-all, universal standard that says that someone should always or never feel afraid in response to certain things, without regard to context.

What I'm not going to argue for here is whether anyone ought to be praised or blamed for feeling one way or another. While it's clearly the case that whether someone should be praised or blamed for their emotions is related to whether someone ought to work to experience one emotion or another, it is an importantly different question and one that I will set entirely to the side in this paper. The reason why is that the pluralist account on which I am relying makes determining whether someone should be praised or blamed highly contextual; while some actions might be categorically blameworthy or praiseworthy, many others will vary based on what other reasons weigh most heavily in any particular situation. Exploring when praise and blame are called for is an important project, but here, I'll focus only on the question of when someone ought to work to let go of fear, specifically when doing so relates to oppression and injustice.

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Evaluating Emotions

I contend that our inner lives—and our emotions in particular—are open to moral evaluation for two reasons. First, I take emotions to be partially active, in that people generally have at least some control over them.[3] Feeling an emotion is not something over which someone has direct, immediate voluntary control. However, people often can exercise agency with regard to their emotions and can take intermediate steps over time to cultivate particular emotional responses to particular types of phenomena. Many obligations extend across time and via intermediate steps in the same way. If I promise to meet a friend for lunch at noon I ought to leave home early enough to get there, even if I get a flat tire on the way and arrive late. I can't simply will myself to be there and make good on my promise; instead, I have to focus on what is within my control in an effort to do what I ought.

While it's usually not the case that someone can simply will themselves to "not be angry" anymore—they can't just flip a switch and stop feeling angry—they *can* exercise agency and work to stop feeling it over time. Let's say I feel angry more than I would like and it is getting in the way of my relationships or life projects. Indeed, I identify as an "angry person" – but I don't want to be. There are a number of steps I can take to try to be less angry. For instance, I can change the music I listen to or the movies that I watch; I can go to therapy and work to reckon with past experiences which continue to cause me to feel angry; and, I can take up meditation as well as a kind of exercise that helps me to "work out" the energy that might otherwise manifest as anger.

I can also try to direct my attention and thoughts in ways that allow me to avoid becoming angry in the first place. If an unfriendly colleague routinely treats me disrespectfully, and thinking about him makes me angry, I might try to think about him as little as possible. Of course many thoughts are not within someone's immediate voluntary control and can arise intrusively. But, many of them are—I can often choose what to think about—and so to the extent that what I think about impacts whether I feel angry, I can also make a choice about whether I will feel angry.

Furthermore, I can make choices about whether I will put myself in a position where directing my attention and thoughts towards my disrespectful colleague will be unavoidable. If a group of other colleagues invite me out to happy hour, but I know that all they will want to do is complain about our disrespectful colleague, then I am in a position where I have to weigh, on one hand, the goods of socializing with them [and the positive value of complaining together (Norlock 2018)] and on the other, my desire not to feel angry about my unfriendly colleague.

The same thing is true when making choices about what media I consume; if reading about current events makes me angry, and I don't want to be angry, I have at least one good reason not to read about current events. That's not to say I have an all-things-considered reason – I also have a competing obligation to be informed about the world that might be what weighs most heavily in any particular context. The point is that I can make a choice about whether to direct my attention towards the kinds of things that I anticipate will cause me to become angry, just as I can make a choice about whether to go to happy hour with similar results.

The point throughout this discussion is not to say that all thoughts and emotions can be so easily regulated. Indeed, if you've ever been awake in the middle of the night, replaying an infuriating situation at work, you likely agree that the choice to stop thinking about that situation can be easier said than done. Here I am assuming that the principle that "ought implies can" is true, which means that if, in any particular case, someone doesn't have the ability to work to think or feel one way or another, then they don't have the obligation to do so. So, if at 3 a.m. I really can't not think about that infuriating work situation then I don't have the obligation not to do so. But, at

least some of the time at 3 a.m. I find that I *am* able to direct to my thoughts elsewhere – to actively try to direct my attention towards something else (or to think about nothing at all, via meditation) – and to thereby come to feel differently.

So, the first reason why it's appropriate to morally evaluate our emotional lives is because emotions are partially within our control, and since everything that is at least partially within our control is open to moral evaluation, it at least makes sense to *ask* whether someone should work to avoid, let go of, or hold on to any particular emotion.

The mere fact that our actions are open to moral evaluation doesn't imply that they are obligatory or impermissible; indeed, many of our actions turn out to be morally neutral. For instance, I can drop a pen onto the floor and it doesn't matter if I do; it is neither the case that I ought or ought not do so (all else being equal). However, it does make sense to ask the question in the first place - the question is intelligible - especially since we can imagine iterations of the case (where all else isn't equal) where I ought not do so. For instance, if the pen in question is your fragile antique fountain pen, gifted to you by your grandparents, then what is usually a morally neutral action becomes one where it is appropriate to say that I ought not commit it. But to be able to distinguish between morally neutral actions and cases where I ought to do one thing rather than another, I have to regard the action as open to moral evaluation in the first place. Our emotional lives are the same way. While many of the emotions someone experiences in their life might be morally neutral, they are all open to moral evaluation, insofar as it at least makes sense to ask, of any particular emotion, whether they ought to feel it or work to give it up.

The second reason why it's appropriate to morally evaluate our inner lives is that doing so coheres with other widely held moral beliefs. I shouldn't hate someone because of the color of their skin; I shouldn't feel contempt (feel as if they are beneath me) for unhoused people I pass on the street; I shouldn't feel disgust when I see a queer couple holding hands in the park. It's not just that I shouldn't treat others badly – I shouldn't feel those things!

Those particular beliefs are grounded in more foundational, general principles that are also widely held. For instance, lots of people believe something like the claim that "everyone is created equal" or "you should love your neighbor as yourself." Since hatred, contempt, and disgust are incompatible with such beliefs, and since those beliefs are foundational and deeply held for many people, I take it many people's deeply held beliefs commit them to the claim that people ought to feel one way or another, at least some of the time. Furthermore, much of the everyday work of moral repair (which I take to be a very common part of moral life) involves relevant parties changing how they feel. For instance, people should regret their wrongful actions, whereas it is often appropriate for those who are wronged to feel angry with them (a point to which I will return shortly). Forgiveness is commonly understood to involve the forgoing of anger or other negative emotions. And, many people believe that there are times when you ought to forgive someone. Indeed, many people believe that you always ought to forgive others![4] But, that belief also entails that there are times where you ought to feel one way or another.

Again, what I am not doing here is thinking about when anyone ought to be praised or blamed for feeling one thing or another. Instead, I am focusing just on the moral evaluation of the emotion itself, and whether someone ought to work to feel one way or another—what someone ought to do—setting aside the question of whether they should be praised or blamed for another day.

To reiterate, I have given two reasons for thinking that our emotional lives are open to moral evaluation. The first reason is that what we feel is often at least partially within our control, and the second is that accepting that claim better coheres with other particular moral beliefs and

general moral principles that many people hold. In light of those reasons, if we indeed grant that emotions are open to moral evaluation, by what criteria should we evaluate them? I suggest that there are at least six criteria we should use.

Evaluative Criteria

First, emotions can be *motivationally* valuable. With this criterion, we evaluate an emotion in terms of its role in what it motivates us to do, and so the value of the action itself plays a significant role in how we should then evaluate the emotion that contributed to it. If I feel happy with my job and in my workplace, I might be more inclined to work harder or collaborate more effectively with my colleagues. Or, if I feel despair and believe a situation to be hopeless, I might lose the motivation to try to change it. Insofar as I ought to work towards those actions, I ought to cultivate the emotion that motivates this work.

Second, emotions might simply be *apt* or *fitting* with regard to their cause or some state of affairs (D'Arms and Jacobson, 2000). With this criterion, we evaluate an emotion in terms of whether and to what extent the emotion corresponds to reality. Amia Srinivasan for instance, talks about the aptness or fittingness of anger in the face of wrongdoing or injustice (Srinivasan 2018). If I become angry because someone treats me wrongly, my anger is simply appropriate for the situation, and conversely, if someone treats me well or shows me an act of kindness then my gratitude is similarly apt.

Third, emotions can have *epistemic* value. With this criterion, we evaluate an emotion in terms of what it helps us to understand, perceive, or be justified in believing about the world. Alison Jaggar argues that emotion is not anathema to reason, but essential to it (Jaggar 2014). Our emotional responses are often data that we can use to better make sense of our situation and to more clearly apprehend what circumstances we face. If I feel joy whenever I am around a particular friend, that helps me to know that is a valuable friendship worth cultivating. On the other hand, if I feel sadness when I am around that person I might come to discover, upon examination of that feeling, that there is something about the relationship that is unhealthy for me. This criterion is similar to the aptness criterion, insofar as both assume that there is a correspondence between some features of my situation and my emotional responses to those features. The epistemic criterion assumes the aptness criterion but goes farther and says not only that some emotional responses are apt, given the features of my situation, but that I can sometimes learn about those features by paying attention to my emotional responses. That doesn't mean that our emotions are always veridical. As Jaggar says "Although our emotions are epistemologically indispensable, they are not epistemologically indisputable" (Jaggar 2014, 389). I might become angry with someone for bad reasons, or might be confused about the case, or the moral status of the actors involved. The point is not to take our emotions to always be perfect guides to knowledge, but to recognize that they can play an important role in helping to justify the knowledge claims that we make.

Fourth, emotions are often *expressive*. With this criterion, an emotional response makes an evaluative claim about the status of the emotion's referent. Specifically, the emotional response recognizes the significance of an action, of the actors involved, of the consequences that follow from an event, or of the moral status of a context. Expression is not synonymous with communication; it need not secure uptake with others, as communication requires. So, for instance, Elizabeth Spelman argues that when I become angry with you for wronging me, my anger expresses—even if only within the confines of my own mind and heart—that I take myself seriously and that I judge myself to be on your level – that I am in a position to judge whether you

acted wrongly or not (Spelman 1989, 266). Or, more fundamentally, as P.F. Strawson argues, my anger when you intentionally cause me physical injury expresses the judgement that you are a person rather than a thing, that you are an agent who can appropriately be held morally responsible rather than a naturally occurring event (Strawson 1974). This criterion is also closely related to the aptness criterion, insofar as it says that our emotions often express a judgement about some state of affairs that is supposed to be apt or fitting. As with the last criterion, the expressive function of emotions is not indisputable. If I incorrectly believe that my roommate stole money from me (when really I simply misplaced my wallet) my anger (that expresses that they acted wrongly) is misplaced. Or, if I am in love with someone, I might be inclined to misperceive their poor treatment of me and so my happiness with them expresses what is actually the inapt judgement that they treat me well.

Fifth, emotions can simply be *pleasurable or displeasurable,* independent of what they produce or what outcomes they enable. Joy feels good; despair feels bad. And, there are perhaps emotions that are neither especially pleasurable or displeasurable. Insofar as the promotion of pleasure and displeasurable are morally salient, it is appropriate to consider both when evaluating an emotion. (While this criterion will prove less relevant to my evaluation of oppressive fear, for the sake of completeness I have included it here.)

Finally, emotions can themselves be bound up with just or unjust ideologies and in that way can be *oppressive or liberatory*. Jaggar says that "emotions become feminist when they incorporate feminist perceptions and values, just as emotions are sexist or racist when they incorporate racist perceptions or values" and that "emotions are appropriate if they are characteristic of a society in which all humans (and perhaps nonhumans) thrive, or if they are conducive to establishing such a society" (Jaggar 2014, 386-387). The anger of the white supremacist and the anger of the person working for racial justice can both be evaluated in light of the ways that they are bound up with, born from, or contribute to larger ideologies which themselves can be evaluated in terms of their relationship to justice or injustice, to oppression or liberation.

In many ways the six criteria feed into each other and cannot be teased apart in particular cases. I will explore some of the ways in which the criteria overlap and become more complicated in part 2. While I take this list to be complete, my project doesn't depend on it being so; it might well be the case that there are additional criteria we would want to use to evaluate emotions as well. My aim in part 1 has been to provide some core desiderata by which we can morally evaluate emotions at all.

Evaluating Fear

I now turn to evaluating fear in particular in light of the criteria I have just explored. Perhaps most obvious are cases of aptness. If I am standing near the end of a cliff, it is apt or fitting for me to feel afraid of falling. Fear can be motivationally valuable in such a case – it might inspire me to be cautious as I approach the edge. Fear might sometimes have epistemic value. As Jaggar notes, by reflecting on the fact that I feel afraid in a particular situation I might come to realize that the situation is dangerous or potentially harmful to me. In that way I learn something new about the world by paying careful attention to my emotional reactions to it. And, fear can express the judgment that something is dangerous, threatening, or harmful.

What of the sixth criterion – about how fear might be bound up with just or unjust ideologies? It's here that I have worries. On one hand, fear in response to oppression or injustice

can have epistemic value, as well as simply being fitting and expressing an appropriate evaluative judgment. It might also be motivationally useful – vital to promoting political solidarity and changing things for the better. On the other hand, I think we very often have good reason to be concerned about fear—to think that it is bad to have on the scene—and that it is something that people ought to work to let go of and that society ought to discourage or dispel more generally. This is true both because of the oppressive *extrinsic* effects fear can have, and the fact that fear can be *intrinsically* oppressive. The extrinsic effects of fear are like collateral damage; they are the secondary outcomes that fear tends to cause, impacting someone other than the person who feels the fear. The intrinsic effects of fear are the primary outcome of fear itself; they impact the person who feels afraid. My reason for distinguishing them is not only to think about who is affected by fear. If that were the case I would refer to 'other-directed' and 'self-directed' harms instead of talking about the external and internal harms of fear. Instead, it is to note that fear can have secondary, oppressive effects, as well as the fact that fear can be oppressive in itself, crafting who and what people become.

Oppressive Fear's Extrinsic Harms

To begin with the extrinsic effects of fear, consider cases like those adapted from recent news stories, in which one person responds to another with violence, justified by the claim that they were afraid. For instance, consider a case where a white woman in a public park calls the police on a Black bird watcher who had asked her to observe park rules and keep her dog on a leash. Second, consider a homeowner who shoots at people who knocked on their door because they had come to the wrong house, needed help, were asking for directions – all citing, in such cases, that they were afraid for their lives. Third, consider myriad cases of violence committed by police officers against people of color, relying on the claim that they were afraid for their lives as a justification for using lethal force. Finally, consider the case of someone experiencing a mental health crisis and who acts erratically on a subway. They are forcibly restrained and put in a chokehold by a bystander who claims they were engaging in active bystander intervention – to protect others on the train from the person exhibiting erratic behavior. While the bystander might not have been afraid, the idea that we need heroes to engage in bystander intervention in such a case is premised on the idea that there is something there about which passengers on the train should have been afraid. In all four cases we see fear driving the harmful actions.

What's important in each of these cases is not whether any of these parties were *actually* afraid. Perhaps there's good reason in each of these cases to think that the actors involved were not afraid but were instead simply aiming to exert dominance or control over others: to assert a claim to power or to hold on to it if they already had it. Regardless, my point is threefold. First, if fear *is* indeed on the scene in such cases, then it is both bad and something that individuals ought to work to give up. Second, such effort is also something that society ought to enable. Third, even if particular people don't happen to feel afraid in cases like these, fear operates ideologically so as to enable such violence – to excuse it morally, to make it legally exculpatory, and to maintain the power of various dominant social groups and preserve the ideologies that justify that dominance.

So far, I have only pointed to the harmful extrinsic effects of oppressive fear; in each case you might think that it doesn't matter (from a moral point of view) whether the actors involved felt fear, but that the only thing that mattered was how they acted on such fear. After all, the woman in the park could have felt afraid of the bird watcher and simply kept it to herself, not calling the police and threatening him with violence. In the same way, the homeowners could have responded

by offering aid rather than violence to those in need. Police officers could learn to manage their fear via more extensive training that is not geared towards viewing every movement as a potentially lethal threat that requires a lethal response. And, the bystander on the train could have engaged in non-violent bystander intervention (as healthcare providers and social workers do all the time), rather than resorting to a lethal chokehold, to help support the person experiencing a mental health crisis. In each of these cases we can see an alternative path that the actors might have taken in which they acted on their fear in a different way and produced much better results.

I take this to be the view for which Ami Harbin argues in *Fearing Together: Ethics for Insecurity* (Harbin 2023). Harbin is not concerned with whether people actually rid themselves of fear, but instead is concerned primarily with the effects of such fear. She recommends methods of working to control our behavior even if we aren't able to control our emotions. We might add to that list other kinds of formal training that enables people to deescalate potentially dangerous situations (as in the case of bystander intervention). We might also set a higher standard for people who enter certain lines of work (like becoming police officers) and say that if you tend to be fearful when encountering certain kinds of situations, perhaps you just shouldn't become a police officer in the first place.[5]

I take each of these types of responses to be in the spirit of harm reduction, an approach that grants that if a particular kind of thing cannot be eliminated, our aim instead should be to manage it.[6] I am generally quite friendly to harm reduction and am in support of all the ways Harbin advocates for managing the extrinsic harms of fear. That said, I do think people should often go farther and work to not be afraid in the first place. Furthermore, society should work to create the conditions where people are able to do so more effectively. The reason is that fear can be intrinsically oppressive, leaving oppression on the scene even if its effects are well-managed.

Oppressive Fear's Intrinsic Harms

Fear can be intrinsically oppressive in at least three ways. The first is that fear can be an oppressive force in itself and function to "mold, immobilize, or reduce"[7] those who feel it, as well as to restrict their exercise of autonomy (Frye 1983, 2-4). The second way that fear can be intrinsically oppressive is that it can craft what kinds of relationships someone enters into and what kinds of people they become. Finally, fear can contribute to oppressive ideologies that reproduce such effects in the lives of others. In the remainder of this section I will explore all three points.

In her canonical "Five Faces of Oppression," Iris Marion Young argues that violence and the threat of violence is one form by which oppression manifests itself in the lives of various social groups, and that "Any woman, for example, has reason to fear rape," that racialized groups have reason to fear violence from the police, and that such "fear of violence functions to help keep these oppressed groups subordinate" (Young 1988, 286). Such *threats* of violence live in the social imaginary and are born from various oppressive ideologies in ways that train people in certain types of behavior and to expect certain types of outcomes.

Consider the role that the threat of sexual violence plays in the U.S. today. In her book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self*, Susan Brison describes her own experience of sexual violence and attempted murder. It's a remarkable book that has been deeply helpful to many readers who have also experienced violence. But, in writing it, Brison worries that she might contribute to what she calls a "prememory" of rape that teaches girls and women to expect to experience such violence (Brison 2002, 86-89). For instance, all of my students have heard – likely many times – the statistic that 1 in 5 women in the U.S. will be sexually assaulted. To be clear I

am not in any way disputing the 1 in 5 statistic (which is likely too low). What I am pointing out is how *knowledge* of that statistic contributes to a particular ideology within which lots of people operate, and which plays a role in crafting who people become.

Of course, it's not just knowledge of that statistic that creates such a "prememory" – it's various cultural products, including things like movies, podcasts, TV shows, and many true crime podcasts, documentaries, or books. I take it that what Brison is describing is the way that the threat of violence looms large in the background and tends to structure women's lives. It's not just violence that does it – it's the threat of violence, and the fear that it brings in its wake. That fear then incentivizes various choices – including all the usual ways that women protect themselves from violence, like being home by dark, walking with keys between their fingers, and traveling in groups.

Those choices are often seriously costly and restrictive. If someone feels unsafe to be out after dark by themself they might not pursue various projects or experiences. Since our projects and experiences help to make us who we are, those restrictions then affect who and what we become. For instance, imagine someone who wants to take a painting class but doesn't have a friend to take it with them and feels afraid to take the class by themself. They choose not to take the class, which means not developing the skill to paint, and then not becoming a painter. In that way, oppressive fear's intrinsic harm is that it prevents the acquisition of a particular ability and the identity that accompanies it. In this case it is not just that the intrinsic harm is self-directed; it is that the fear's primary effect is that it molds, reduces, and immobilizes the person who experiences it. And, since such oppression is bad, the person who feels that fear has moral reason to work to give it up.

I want to be very clear that I don't at all mean to suggest that such fear and its intrinsically harmful effects are universal; many people who might be socialized to feel afraid in fact don't, or they do and they face their fear or work around it in various ways. Indeed, there are myriad ways to resist or to go off script, and I'll argue for the value of such resistance in part 3 of this paper. My point here is that one of the ways oppressive fear plays out is by molding or restricting the life projects and choices that members of subordinated groups make, or by requiring the work to overcome or reckon with such restriction. That's simply one way that oppression plays out in people's lives. And, since oppression is bad, we should work to create the conditions where people do not experience such oppressive fear or are able to work to let go of it. This point is admittedly quite challenging and complicated. I will explore some of those complications in section 2.3, and return to its challenging nature in section 3.

In addition to the first intrinsic harm of curtailing autonomy, the background threat of violence also influences the relationships that people bear to each other—incentivizing some and disincentivizing others—and insofar as we are all deeply social, relational beings, that is yet another way that it influences who and what we become. Claudia Card called the prevalence of sexual violence a protection racket that functions to maintain men's power, either by threatening violence or by offering protection from violence (Card 1996). Brison recounts the hours and days immediately after her assault and describes various men with whom she interacted: police officers, the ambulance driver, doctors. Brison describes them as kind and helpful and says that she was "impressed by the concern, the competence, the solicitousness, of (almost all) the men in charge. But they were men – and they were in charge. [She says] I felt like a pawn – a helpless, passive victim – caught up in a ghastly game in which some men ran around trying to kill women and others went around trying to save them" (Brison 2002, 89-90). When operating within a patriarchal

backdrop, part of what makes someone a "good guy" – and a good contender to be someone you date or are friends with – is that they don't seem like they would commit violence.

Moreover, sometimes, "good guys" aren't just the kinds of people who wouldn't commit violence but are also the kinds of people who would *rescue* others from violence. Sometimes good guys are *heroes* who protect vulnerable others from villains. We have many reasons to be concerned about what I'll refer to as hero/villain thinking (Emerick and Dea 2024). One of them is that it flattens and reduces the people who commit seriously wrongful actions, thereby undermining the possibility that they might take responsibility for their wrongs (Emerick and Yap 2024). Another is that it obscures the way that heroes are themselves also morally complicated. As Audrey Yap has argued, standard tropes about who commits rape—who we should be afraid of— are racist, classist, and ableist. They also distract us from the fact that most sexual violence isn't committed by someone jumping out from a dark alleyway but instead by someone the person who is assaulted knows – often quite well (Yap 2017).

There are a number of types of incentives someone might have to engage in hero/villain thinking, but one of them is psychological. In particular, one thing in which you might take comfort is the idea that you are a morally good person—that you live rightly and would never commit an act of cruelty—but instead that you stand against cruelty in others. It's not just that you aren't a villain like those other people – *it's that you're a hero.*

The allure of being a hero is often very strong and hard to resist. It can be so compelling to be at the center of the story and to get all the attention that heroes typically receive. Indeed, heroes tend to take up all the oxygen in the room as they stand against the villains. They get to exercise agency as the main characters in the story who expand their worlds while shrinking the worlds of those secondary characters who are merely acted upon.[8] Such expansion and restriction of people's worlds and who they can be in their own stories is another way in which oppressive fear can be intrinsically harmful.

Furthermore, heroes need villains against whom to fight, against whom to be in opposition. We have ideologies like patriarchy or white supremacy that influence the patterns of behavior and identities we are encouraged to adopt. Ideologies have such influence via many routes, but cultural products like movies, TV shows, and pieces of true crime are big ones. There are also just common beliefs in the social imaginary – those things that "everybody knows" that then craft how people live in the world and are habituated to it. All of these influences are just totally rife with fear – the threat of violence and those things of which people "should" be afraid.

This culture of fear helps to create or maintain a dynamic where there are heroes who are there to save potential victims from villains. The police are there to save white people from Black people, men are there to save women from other men, or homeowners are going to save themselves or their families from the villains who drove onto their property by mistake. Just as the heroes of the story get to take up a lot of space, the villains are flattened and reduced to mere caricature. Again, as profoundly social beings who get to be who we are always in relation to others, if the world marks you as a villain you might be reduced or limited in who and what you can become – another intrinsic harm of oppressive fear (Emerick and Yap 2024).

Of course, I'm not saying that people shouldn't care for each other, and I appreciate that there are times where people do commit heroic actions – both big, noticeable ones like when someone runs into a burning building to rescue someone, and small, everyday acts of kindness that wouldn't make headlines. I'm not saying that we shouldn't celebrate both types of action or praise people when they commit them. But I do think we almost always have reason to be wary of hero/villain thinking, in part because of the larger social meaning such thinking carries with it

within oppressive ideological systems like white supremacy, patriarchy, and nationalism.[9] And, fear plays a central role in hero/villain thinking. We therefore have good reason for being concerned about the way fear not only leads to particular actions (as in the four cases that illustrated the extrinsic effects of oppressive fear) but the way that fear is bound up with oppressive ideologies and the relationships and identities they help to generate.

Complications

Recall that we can evaluate emotions in terms of the six criteria I explored in section 1.2. There are many cases where we should evaluate fear positively according to each of the criteria. Again, fear is apt or fitting in the face of some threat of harm; it simply matches up with and reflects the reality of the situation. Second, fear can be motivationally useful; it can inspire someone to fight back, run away, or otherwise try to prepare for or respond to the threat of harm. Third, fear can be epistemically valuable; it can help someone to know that there is something threatening there in the first place. Indeed, that last point is especially important. Jaggar argues that it is "only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability, revulsion, anger or fear may we bring to consciousness our 'gut-level' awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice, or danger" (Jaggar 2014, 387). Often, someone's body might recognize that it faces some threat of harm before it becomes clearly identifiable or articulable. In that way, paying attention to fear can save someone's life.[10] Fourth, fear might express an important judgment about a situation and that something is threatening, or that someone is acting wrongly, or that the person who feels fear has value. After all, fear that an unimportant object might be broken would be inapt; when someone feels afraid that a priceless family heirloom might be destroyed, they implicitly recognize the value of the object. In that way, fear, like anger, can serve as a form of self-respect. Fifth, fear might sometimes feel good; it can be pleasurable to experience fear (as when riding a roller-coaster or watching a scary movie). And, finally, it might contribute to justice or liberation from oppression.

This last point is not as clear as the others, and it may be the case that fear does not directly contribute to justice much of the time. But, its liberatory potential can be seen more plainly when grounded in criteria 1-4 (though fear might be liberatory in other ways as well). If fear is valuable in some or all of the other ways described, it might then contribute indirectly to political action that counters, reforms, or abolishes oppressive social arrangements. Consider, for instance, the fear that people might experience in the face of climate change. That fear can be positive, according to criteria 1-4; it is apt, it can motivate political action and organizing to try to reduce carbon emissions, it expresses something true and valuable, and it can help people to learn things about human and non-human vulnerability. Insofar as it produces that motivation it also satisfies the sixth criteria, although indirectly. And, we can see that all the more clearly when recognizing that the other criteria might themselves contribute to that motivation (insofar as you have to know about a state of affairs in order to be motivated to try to change it).

For all these reasons, we often have good reason to be afraid. As a result, we also have good reason to appreciate and value fear and the role that it can play in our lives, and the way that many of the reasons we have to feel afraid compound or contribute to each other. However, at the same time, there are many times where the reasons we have to feel afraid or not will not all perfectly line up with each other.

As I said at the outset, I am embracing a type of pluralism about reasons that says that the fact that you have reason to do something doesn't necessarily mean that you have reason, all things

considered, to do that thing. For instance, on a particular Tuesday night I might have reason to stay up late watching movies (it would be fun, relaxing, a way to hang out with friends, etc.) I also might have reason to go to bed early (I'll have an easier morning the next day, my teaching will be better, etc.). Both sets of reasons are good, and on any given week I might have the most decisive reason either to stay up late or go to bed early. The strength of a pluralistic account that rejects a one-size-fits-all analysis is that we have room to assess accurately the messiness of the world and appreciate the significance of context for helping to determine what evaluation we should make.

Such real-world messiness brings with it theoretical complications. First, note that the different evaluative criteria can be in tension with each other. For instance, fear might be epistemically valuable, and it might express something true and important. At the same time, it might also be motivationally disvaluable, it might feel bad, and it might be oppressive. Because oppression is always bad, and because fear can be oppressive in these ways, oppressive fear is always bad. But, it can also be apt or fitting within oppressive social contexts.

Young is right that in a patriarchal, sexist world any woman has reason (according to the aptness criterion) to fear rape. But that doesn't mean that any particular woman has *decisive* reason to fear rape. Whether any particular person does is a question that I will not seek to answer, because the pluralism underlying my approach says that we wouldn't be able to make such a judgement without a lot of information that will vary considerably across contexts. And, as a reminder, I am also not weighing in on whether anyone ought to be blamed for feeling fear or not, for treating as decisive one set of reasons or not. Instead, what I want to reckon with is the fact that it will often be true that it is apt or fitting for someone to feel afraid, given the empirical or material facts on the ground, and also that someone has moral reason to work to give up such fear. We can say both things at the same time without undermining either.

One might grant that someone has *prudential* reason to work to give up such fear but deny that one has *moral* reason to do so. I am taking for granted the view that we bear obligations to ourselves. Arguing for that position is beyond the scope of this paper, but here I just want to note that when counseling a friend who is weighing some difficult decision, I might say to them, "You owe it to yourself to do one thing or another." In so doing I am not saying merely that it would satisfy other goals they have for themself, but that they have moral reason to treat themself well, since they deserve to be treated with respect and kindness by everyone, including themself. Again, that doesn't mean we should blame someone for failing to treat themself well, but it is indeed a moral "ought" that I employ when saying that to a friend.

Part of the reason why this point is worth dwelling on is that aptness in particular will often run contrary to the other evaluative criteria. Insofar as aptness is descriptive, it captures something true about the world. All else equal, it is simply apt or fitting to feel joy when listening to your favorite band, or to feel anger when someone wrongs you, or to feel fear when looking over the edge of the Grand Canyon; the empirical reality to which the emotions respond warrant them in each case. But, as I've been arguing, someone might also have reason (with regard to any particular emotion) to aim to feel something else, given the other criteria at play. In short, there will often be a tension between the aptness of an emotion (especially emotions like fear or anger) and the other evaluative criteria.

As another example, consider the expressive value of anger. When someone becomes angry with another they express (at least within the confines of their own mind) that they regard themself as being worthy of respect and better treatment, and that they regard the wrongdoer as a person (rather than as a naturally occurring event). At the same time, anger is often a painful or unpleasant emotion. It can ruin a day, disrupt relationships, make someone lose sleep, and so on.

There will be cases where someone has reason not to feel angry (and so to work to stop feeling angry over time), even though their anger is both apt and expressive of true and important things (Srinivasan 2018). And, as I said in part 1, letting go of anger is commonly thought to be an important part of forgiveness, which is often deeply important to others (both the wrongdoer and those related to them). The question of whether to work to let go of anger means trying to weigh various competing reasons that count in favor of or against doing so. Again, the pluralist account of the reasons that justify feeling various emotions does not offer a universal prescription or answer but instead simply identifies the kinds of factors that can count for or against the emotion, leaving the determination of what reasons are decisive to be context-dependent, a point to which I will return in the next section.

Things become even more complicated when we consider the different social locations someone might occupy when trying to make that determination. As I drew the lines between various social locations before they were neat and tidy. But of course things are not so simple and clear cut, and often someone will experience different types of fear at the same time. In particular, because people's social locations are intersectional, the fears they experience (or don't) will likely also be intersectional and not track neatly along only one part of their identity. White women have good reason to fear sexual assault; their fear is apt and is oppressive in the ways described above. But, it also can be oppressive for others – especially Black and brown men – who themselves experience oppressive violence from the police. So, with all that in mind, what should we do in the face of oppressive fear?

Responding to Oppressive Fear

The answer to that question will vary based on who is feeling afraid and what intersectional social location they occupy. Here, I'll briefly name six responses that I think different parties should consider (understanding that these divisions are more complicated than this list suggests).

First, if someone feels afraid in a way that is potentially *oppressive for others*, in that it is likely to contribute to structural extrinsic harms (like police violence) against a particular social group, they have reason to work to stop feeling that way. As I said at the outset, letting go of such fear isn't something someone could do immediately or effortlessly. We are trained in oppressive ideologies and coming to enact, as Sally Haslanger says, different "patterns of body, mind, and heart" takes time and concerted effort (Haslanger 2012, 4). But those who feel oppressive fear have reason to put in that effort – to work to let go of the fear that they ought not feel. Recall the example I gave in part 1, about choosing how to take intermediate steps to avoid becoming angry with a disrespectful colleague. Here, those steps might involve things like choosing to consume different media that does not encourage oppressive fear, choosing to associate with different people who do not stoke such fear, and choosing to think differently about the object of fear. Of course many of those changes might be hard to make, but many things that are hard are also obligatory. And, in the meantime, while working to accomplish those long-term changes of heart, they should also work to manage their fear and not act on it in ways that lead to such extrinsic harms.

Second, if someone is afraid in a way that is potentially *oppressive for themself*, they also have reason to work to let go of it. In this type of case if they work to give up oppressive fear they should recognize that doing so is an important political action. If fear is itself intrinsically oppressive for the person who experiences it, then working to give up fear can be liberatory. Indeed, I suggest that giving up fear, or refusing to be afraid in the first place, should be recognized

as what Tamara Fakhoury calls "quiet resistance" (Fakhoury 2021). Fakhoury says, "One engages in an act of Quiet Resistance when one acts against an oppressive norm out of love for a specific person, project, or pursuit, and with some understanding that one's behavior is socially condemned and liable to provoke backlash" (Fakhoury 2021, 4).

I am extending Fakhoury's account of quiet resistance to help make sense of the way that our inner, emotional lives are sites where political resistance can take place, and in this case refusing to feel afraid when that is what people in your social location are "supposed" to do counts in ways that we should recognize and appreciate. As Jaggar says, "Critical reflection on emotion is not a self-indulgent substitute for political analysis and political action. It is itself a kind of political theory and political practice, indispensable for an adequate social theory and social transformation" (Jaggar 2014, 389). Indeed, the very personal is political.

To reiterate: I am not saying that someone should be blamed for failing to let go of such oppressive fear, nor am I suggesting that people should ignore the fear that they experience (since sometimes it might be apt or epistemically valuable). But, if such fear (even when satisfying multiple other evaluative criteria) is oppressive, and oppressive forces are bad, then someone has good reason (though perhaps not decisive reason) to work to let go of it. Recognizing that letting go of fear counts as a political act, as Fakhoury and Jaggar encourage us to do, helps to justify making that choice and prioritizing the justice criteria in particular cases. This is especially notable in those cases where fear is also apt. Refusing to be afraid when the world tells you that you should be (and when the world in fact contains frightening elements) can be an important form of resistance, and one that should be celebrated and encouraged.

Third, if someone is a *third party* to oppressive fear, they have reason to work to stop contributing to it for others. Here I'm thinking of the way that parents talk with their children, that teachers talk with their students, that politicians talk while campaigning; in all of these cases we have to find a way to talk about statistics without reinforcing the conditions that generate them, to talk about things like gendered violence without reifying oppressive masculinity. This is hard to do, and Brison's worry about creating a "prememory" of violence and thereby contributing to oppressive fear in others looms large here. The fact that it is hard in no way justifies retreat from such conversations; to counter oppression we must talk about it and teach about it clearly and unflinchingly, giving an honest account of the world. But when doing so it is crucial not to contribute to the very systems someone is trying to describe – a sometimes difficult but always necessary needle to thread.

Fourth, if someone is a *beneficiary* of oppressive fear – if it works in their favor to be seen as a good guy or a hero – they have good reason to think long and hard about what that means in their life. How are they leaning in to that identity or away from it?[11] Do they take themself to be at the center of the story, running around trying to save women from villainous men, as Brison described? Do they expect some type of payment for doing so, as in Card's "protection racket"? As is always the case with oppression some of that is simply outside of someone's control; someone might be regarded as a potential hero or savior, or thought of as a "good guy" who wouldn't commit violence, but not actively seek out those judgements or any payment or reward. Still, it is worthwhile for someone to interrogate those features of their life and relationships and ask if there are ways to reduce oppressive dependency, power relations, or the exercise of control over others.

Fifth, *everyone* has reason to think about the cultural products they consume, what social stories they tell, how they talk with people about violence, what types of politicians they vote for, and what they accept as exculpatory reasons for engaging in violence. So, for instance, everyone

should be skeptical of police procedurals and true crime as a genre. Everyone should vote against politicians who promise to be "tough on crime" or who argue for xenophobic immigration policies. Everyone should expect police officers to meet a higher standard in justifying violent self-defense than simply fearing for their lives.

And finally, *everyone* has reason to work to change the social conditions so that fear doesn't arise as much in the first place by challenging things like white supremacy, rape culture and masculinity, poverty, and militarism. The scope and weight of this obligation is obviously enormous. Our aim should therefore be twofold – at the structural level we should work to remake the world. But, as Jaggar says in what she calls "the unjust meantime," "we can only start from where we are – beings who have been created in a cruelly racist, capitalist and male-dominated society that has shaped our bodies and our minds, our perceptions, our values, and our emotions…." (Jaggar 2019 and 2014, 388). I contend that part of where we should aim to go from here, given that starting place, is to feel less fear and to encourage less fear in others.

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[2] My position is broadly Rossian, in that I claim we ought to weigh competing reasons within a particular context to determine what we ought to do, and what weighs most heavily in one context will be outweighed in another.

[3] For more on this, and a helpful overview of the psychological literature on the regulation of emotions, see Gross 2015.

[4] Elsewhere, I develop a similarly pluralistic account of the reasons that count for and against forgiving others. See Emerick 2017.

[5] Despite the cultural story we tell about criminality, being a police officer is not as dangerous as one might think. According to a 2022 survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics it is not one of the 10 most dangerous jobs in the United States. Here, I'm just granting that being a police officer actually is inherently dangerous and saying that if that's the case, we should expect people who become police officers to have a higher than standard fear tolerance that allows them to respond non-violently in threatening situations. https://www.bls.gov/charts/census-of-fatal-occupational-injuries/civilian-occupations-with-high-fatal-work-injury-rates.htm

[6] For a helpful overview of harm reduction, see Dea 2016.

[7] Frye says that oppression has the effect of molding, immobilizing, and reducing those who experience it. I am here extending that insight to say that fear can itself be oppressive since it can have those same effects.

[8] Many thanks to Kelly Weirich for helping me think through this point and for sharing some of this helpful phrasing.

[9] For more on a related point see Archer and Matheson 2021, who discuss what they call the "vice of globalism". See also Rochat 2020.

[10] Indeed, within patriarchy women are often told *not* to be afraid and that they are overreacting to something if they are, making it all the more important that we recognize and appreciate the epistemic value of emotion in general, and fear in particular. Thanks to Beth Sperry for raising this point, and to Ella Skidmore for helping me think it through.

[11] https://whitney.org/collection/works/34103