

## How is Feminist Philosophy Nonideal Theory?<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract:**

Feminist, and other liberatory, moral and political philosophies are widely understood as nonideal theories. But if feminism is just a set of first-order normative commitments, it is unclear why it should produce action-guiding philosophy. I argue that feminist philosophy characteristically takes oppressive salience idealization (OSI) to undermine the means-end consistency of normative theories. OSI involves characterizing the world in ways that give undue weight to the interests and perspectives of the dominant. Our ability to respond to the normative problems our actual world faces us with is undermined by OSI, especially at the levels of problem-framing and selection.

### **Keywords:**

Ideal theory, feminist philosophy, nonideal theory, oppression, political philosophy, feminist ethics

It is often assumed that feminist, and other liberatory, ethical and political philosophies are nonideal theories. However, it is not obvious why this should be or what it means. Feminist philosophy predates the ascent of nonideal theory in mainstream philosophy. The idea that both approaches have in common “starting with the real world” is unhelpfully vague.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, if feminism is just a set of first-order normative commitments, it’s unclear why it

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<sup>2</sup> For discussions of the vagueness of the idea that nonideal theory is interested in the real world, see Schwartzman 2016; Stemplowska 2008; Swift 2008; Valentini 2012; Tessman 2010; Shelby 2013; Norlock 2016

should dictate theory with any particular form, let alone the action-guiding form it is typically thought nonideal theory should have. We don't typically think that opposition to animal suffering or support for treating people as ends requires us to produce action-guiding theory, so why should opposition to oppression be different? Opposition to oppression could just as well motivate utopian theorizing, or theorizing that merely reveals the tragic character of injustice.

Here, I offer a conception of feminist normative theory that explains why, and in what sense, we should expect it to be action-guiding. My view is that feminist ethics conceives what I call "oppressive salience idealization" as an impediment to formulating appropriately fact-sensitive normative concepts and theories. I emphasize the ways oppressive salience idealization impacts the selection and framing of moral and political problems and show how this, in turn, undermines the ability of those theories to offer prescriptions consistent with the value of ending oppression—a form of what I call "means-end consistency." Put nontechnically, my view is this: feminists think we need knowledge of the world we actually inhabit to construct theory that can respond to the normative problems it faces us with, and undue emphasis on the concerns and perspectives of the dominant impedes the acquisition of such knowledge. I take the technical description of feminist philosophy I offer in this paper to have been implicit in the practices of feminist philosophy for decades; much of my aim is just to render these commitments explicit, explain how they map onto the ideal/nonideal debate, and to draw out their relevance for normative theory.

In the paper's first section, I show how feminist moral and political philosophers are engaged in a critique of idealization, but that it is a critique of a particular sort of idealization,

which I call “oppressive salience idealization.” Second, I explain how the idea that oppressive salience idealization can produce defects in normative theories by rendering them means-end inconsistent reveals an underlying desire for fact-sensitive normative theory. Third, I show why my characterization of feminist philosophy is superior to another that might be thought to capture the relation between feminism and action guidance in a more commonsense way: the characterization of feminist philosophy as the first-order normative commitment to opposing oppression. Fourth, I explain why we should prefer my account of why feminist philosophy is nonideal to competing explanations of the feminist/nonideal connection that, like mine, draw on the distinction between abstraction and idealization. Finally, I stave off the worry that my characterization of feminist philosophy makes feminist philosophy viciously circular by discussing the role the normative commitment to opposing oppression plays within it.

### **Feminist Philosophy as A Critique of Oppressive Salience Idealization**

The frequent assertion that feminism is a species of nonideal theory stands in need of justification. Part of the reason for this is that, as nearly every article on nonideal theory begins by pointing out, the term “nonideal theory” is not well-defined. Nonideal theory has been characterized in a number of ways, most often as theory that is action-guiding some sense (for an overview see Valentini 2012; see also Stemploskwa 2008) or avoids objectionable forms of idealization (see the conversation surrounding Mills 2005; see also Cohen 2003).<sup>3</sup> However, the

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<sup>3</sup> Nonideal theory has also sometimes been characterized, including by Rawls himself (1978: 246), as theory that guides societies in responding to “historical contingencies” (see also Simmons 2010 and Hendrix 2013), as well as theory that is too abstract (see Schwartzman 2016).

relationship between idealization and lack of action guidance might be spelled out in a number of ways, as might the relationship between both of these things and feminism.

There are a number of distinct ways idealization might thwart a theory's action guidingness (idealization might, for instance, produce theory that is too demanding,<sup>4</sup> or assumes away problems that it is trying to solve<sup>5</sup>, or, it might only offer pictures of end-states<sup>6</sup>). There are also a number of distinct possible reasons feminists might criticize idealization (idealization, might for example, make the world seem better than it is, obscure the process of the genesis of ideals, or offer impossible suggestions for improving it). Since it is not obvious what feminist resistance to idealization consists in or why that should lead to preference for action-guiding theory, much remains to be said about the feminist/nonideal connection.

The story I am about to tell connecting feminism to action-guidance will explain why feminist criticisms of idealization reveal and underlying commitment to fact-sensitive theory. My story turns on the idea that feminists oppose a specific form of idealization I call "oppressive salience idealization." Put simply, oppressive salience idealization occurs when we paint a picture of the world that emphasizes the attributes of the world that are most evident to members of dominant groups, or whose emphasis serves their interests.

Before I say more about what oppressive salience idealization is, I pause to clarify my terminology. I use the term "feminist philosophy" here as shorthand for feminist normative theory, including ethics and social and political philosophy. I aim to include both, because, as I hope the content of this paper will make clear, I think feminists have long been problematizing

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<sup>4</sup> See feasibility theorists such as Chabon 2017 and Gheaus 2013. See also Sen 2009.

<sup>5</sup> This is one way we might understand the common criticism of Rawls' assumption of full compliance.

<sup>6</sup> See Mills 2005, Sen 2009, Khader 2019.

mainstream philosophy's depoliticization of moral theory. It is canon for feminist philosophers that social facts, including facts about power, should figure in our theorizing about right and wrong. Additionally, since feminism includes normative commitments, it is possible that some of what I say about oppressive salience idealization will apply to feminist work in subfields not traditionally thought of as normative, such as philosophy of language or philosophy of science. I won't take a stance on that issue here.

The approaches I group under the heading "feminist philosophy" here criticize mainstream Anglo-American philosophy for ignoring, justifying, or preventing adequate discussion of, oppression. Women are not the only oppressed group in Western societies, and critical race philosophy, as well as many strains of Marxism, philosophy of disability, and queer and trans philosophy are also captured by my analysis. My terminology should not be taken to suggest, however, that the differences among liberatory philosophies are not significant, or that the other theories are mere applications of feminism. Feminist critiques of Anglo-American philosophy happen to be longstanding and particularly well-established, but the relationship between feminism and other liberatory philosophies is certainly not unidirectional.

### *Defining Oppressive Salience Idealization*

To understand what oppressive salience idealization is, we need to have in mind a certain idea of how we arrive at normative theories. Theory construction inevitably requires abstraction from experience (including, of course, the experience of our own intuitions and moral judgments). We construct theory to navigate moral and political problems. Some of these are formulated very generally (like which terms of cooperation agents forming a society should adopt) and some are formulated more specifically (like whether prisons should be

abolished or reformed). We try to evaluate, or try to provide an explanatory framework that helps us understand how we should evaluate, some element of our experience of the world. This point about the necessity of experience to theory construction is, I hope, relatively uncontroversial and theory-independent.

Oppressive salience idealization (OSI) occurs as part of the process of abstracting from experience that any attempt at theory-construction requires. As Onora O'Neill (1987) notes, theorizing thus always requires bracketing some features of the object(s) we are theorizing about. But O'Neill observes, we can end up idealizing when we think we are abstracting. Idealization, for O'Neill, involves attributing to an object (positively valenced) features that it does not actually possess. O'Neill's examples mostly concern idealizations of human cognitive capacities common in rational choice theory. Rational choice theorists imagine human beings acting under full information, having complete self-knowledge, or having reliable and accurate knowledge about the preferences.

O'Neill's discussion notwithstanding, stipulation, or adding features to an object, is not the only way to idealize about it. We can, and I would suggest more frequently *do*, idealize by assigning the wrong weight or valence to certain features. Take the classic psychoanalytic example, the idealization of the mother. I can idealize my mother by pretending that she is good and that her world revolves around me. Of course, I may just be conjuring a kind mother in the place of my cruel one. But more often than not there will be grains of truth to my idealization; I will have inflated real features of her and sidelined others, such as that she loves people besides me. O'Neill's explicit argument is about stipulation, but her examples can be straightforwardly described as cases of misplaced emphasis. Human beings *are* rational and

often aware of other people's desires, just not to the degrees that the rational choice theorist assumes. Moreover, the selection of rationality as *the* property of human agents relevant to theory construction is a sidelining of other properties.

In other words, idealization can work, not just through stipulation, but through rendering salient (or too salient) some elements of a phenomenon we are theorizing about. This is the type of idealization I think feminist philosophy has long been accusing mainstream philosophy of engaging in. We worry that it highlights the wrong aspects of the person, or the social order or its history,<sup>7</sup> elements that are parochial to the dominant or that support a picture of the world that it serves dominant interests to maintain. Presenting the attributes of the dominant as universal, or a picture of the world that emphasizes elements it is in dominant interests to maintain is what I call "oppressive salience idealization" (OSI). This is a technical term, but it's intended to capture the normative theoretical ramifications of a longstanding feminist concern—the one feminists idiomatically refer to as "centering." When we say that we do not want to center the concerns of dominant groups, such as men, whites, cisgender women, and able-bodied people, we mean that do not want the picture of the world to which our theory or activism responds to unduly reflect the perspectives or interests of such persons. We center the perspectives of the marginalized to try to undo the damage.

### *Two Examples of OSI Affecting the Outputs of Normative Theory*

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<sup>7</sup> Hendrix (2013) argues that a goal of nonideal theory is to help us confront the obstacles to our current society's transformation. OSI can affect a society's understanding of its own past. For examples of OSI of the past affecting our contemporary efforts to transform society, see Mills' (1997) argument about how constructed ignorance of slavery undergirds the racial contract and Khader's (2019) discussion of how a global social ontology that takes cultures as its units obscures the history of colonialism.

To illustrate how OSI can infect normative theory, as well as to support the point that feminist philosophers have long been critiquing OSI, I offer two relatively representative examples from the feminist philosophical canon, which I will continue to discuss throughout the paper. First are Mills' criticisms of the contractarian tradition, which he explicitly takes to borrow from feminist methods (Mills 2005). Mills argues that contractarianism has caused political philosophers to misunderstand the function of the concept of the person (Mills 1997: 55–56). The real historical function of the concept has, he argues, been to ensure, and justify, the relegation of some people to subpersonal status. Yet the contractarian tradition represents the concept of the person as functioning to erode hierarchies of status.

For Mills, normative failures result from the mistaken view of the function of the concept *person*. These include taking racism to consist only in disrespect for individual persons, rather than in the concept of the person itself, or in the institutional design of society (Mills 2009: 170). Mills' more targeted criticism of Rawls is similar in structure. Rawls thinks that the problem of liberal societies is the Westphalian one of making it possible for individuals with divergent conceptions of the good to cooperate and secure well-being and liberty for all (Mills 2009: 173). But, Mills argues, what if the real problem that liberalism needs to solve is the problem of 1492, not 1648—the problem of structurally and institutionally created white supremacy, or more generally, the problem of subpersons? Just as we may end up ignoring institutional racism if we think racism is disrespect for persons, we may end up giving too much weight to the liberty to uphold white supremacy if we do not see that we are designing rules for a society that has long protected white supremacist attitudes.



Eva Feder Kittay's work on dependency also shows how normative theoretical defects result from rendering too salient characteristics of the world that it is in the interests of the dominant to emphasize (Kittay 1999). Kittay argues that dependency is a central and ineluctable feature of the human condition. All of us sometimes depend on others for basic survival—in childhood, at the very least, and many of us will depend on others in our daily lives. Kittay wonders, then, why the needs of dependents and those who care for them are simply omitted from most liberal political philosophy. Dependency is a clear candidate for a circumstance of justice, since one reason humans cooperate with others is to ensure access to care and support for dependency work (Kittay 1999: 83–88). The idea that humans are “fully cooperating over a lifetime” is an idealization that misses the lifelong dependencies many of us face and obscures the social significance and necessity of care work (Kittay 1999: 88–93). The classification of income, but not care, as a primary good provides only partial solutions to women's oppression in a world where caregiving is feminized and not assigned an economic value (Kittay 1999: 103–4).

Mills (Mills 2005; 1997; 2009) and Kittay share a story about how philosophy got in this mess—one related to the positionality of philosophers. In Mills' view, the positionality of philosophers, including the contemporary predominance of white philosophers in the highest prestige journals and institutions, has played a role in determining what the discipline counts as important normative problems. When philosophers who have always counted as persons construct normative theory around the problems they face, it is unsurprising neither that the problem of subpersons is absent, nor that the theory might take an interest in the “problem” of keeping subpersons in their place. Similarly, Kittay argues that the illusion of independence is

particularly available to those who are not dependency workers. It is easy to see oneself, and human beings, as autonomous when one's house seems to clean itself and someone else is caring for the children.

### **Means-End Fact Insensitivity: How Oppressive Salience Idealization Threatens Action**

#### **Guidance**

I have said that feminists oppose OSI and that it produces defective normative theories. But so far, I have located the defectiveness only in the oppressive content of the prescriptions they generate. To make the case that feminists are nonideal theorists, I need to show that concern with OSI entails a sense that normative theories should take a certain shape. I turn to this issue now. To anticipate, my view is that facts, including the facts OSI obscures, only matter to moral prescriptions if we are trying to figure out what we should do in a given context, or under a given set of circumstances.

My argument that feminist philosophy aims at action guidance draws on a particular conception of action guidance, known in the ideal/nonideal debate as fact-sensitivity. G.A. Cohen (2003) originally developed the distinction between fact-sensitive and fact-insensitive principles to criticize Rawls' theory of justice. In Cohen's view, a principle (or other moral prescription) is fact-sensitive if matters of fact are among the grounds for affirming it. In moral and political philosophy, the class of relevant facts are mostly facts about the person and the social world.

#### *What Means-End Consistency Is*

The idea that OSI is an impediment to successful normative theorizing reveals a desire for normative theory to be fact-sensitive. In order to see how, though, we need to see that fact-

sensitivity is not limited to its most common guise in the literature, namely feasibility (Chahboun 2017; Gheaus 2013; Gilibert 2009; Southwood 2018). One way that facts about the world and persons can matter is that they can constrain what is possible to bring about through human action. A normative prescription that we should reduce our carbon emissions by jumping across the ocean instead of flying, or one that says we should end social conflict by waving a wand that will bring about agreement on whether there is a god, are insensitive to feasibility constraints.

But facts about the world do not only impact normative theories by deflating them, or by affecting *how demanding* theories should be. Facts about the world also affect how means-end effective normative theories are (see Pogge 1990, Khader 2019)—that is, how capable theories are at bringing about morally desirable states of affairs, especially states of affairs that are desirable by the theories' own lights. For example, we might reject moral prescriptions whose adoption brings about action that is inconsistent with them. We may notice, for example, that permitting humanitarian intervention in an imperialist world actually generates more humanitarian crises (Pogge 1990), that thinking of ourselves as having a stable and enduring character gets in the way of our improving the way we treat other people (see Doris 2002 and Bommarito 2020<sup>8</sup>), or that thinking of feminism as requiring strong autonomy commitments will reduce the ability of women from more communal or religious cultural contexts to criticize gender inequality (Khader 2018). In these cases, principles are inadequately

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<sup>8</sup> Bommarito offers this argument as part of a discussion of the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between that concept, the self, and moral action, see Finnigan (2018).

fact-sensitive, because their misdescriptions of the world in which they will be enacted produce theories with perverse results.

#### *How Lacks of Means-End Consistency Affect Problem Selection and Characterization*

It is clear enough how lack of means-end consistency can undermine *applications* of normative theory. The prescription to cut the welfare rolls in order to make women financially independent, for example, was clearly misguided because (among other things) of a failure to understand what kinds of jobs were actually available to low-income women with children. But it can also infect theory in deeper ways. One, which been central to feminist philosophy, is at the level of problem selection. As Matthew Lindauer (2020) argues, normative concepts attempt to solve practical problems at various levels of abstraction, ranging from the problem of the will needing to give itself a law (see Korsgaard 2003) to the problem of how to achieve a stable conception of justice (see Rawls 1991) to how to motivate the rich to give more to the poor.

If this is true, problem selection and framing is a clear route by which false views about the world can affect the *outputs* of normative theories. The advocate of humanitarian intervention ends up with the prescription she does because she assumes the problem is that of equal and well-intentioned states trying to enforce human rights. The advocate of attending to one's character does so because she overlooks the fact that we are creatures with self-serving psychological biases. The autonomy-focused feminist ends up pressing autonomy because she mistakenly thinks that problem is that not enough people have adopted a Western comprehensive doctrine. When philosophers engage in oppressive salience idealization, our

theoretical goals themselves can go awry, and this leads to mistaken principles, not just mistaken applications.

The ways that problem misidentification caused by oppressive salience idealization can affect theoretical outputs (and ultimately make them oppression-perpetuating) are multiple, and, because some of them are not obvious, I will spell out a few here. Choosing the wrong problems does not simply mean that when one problem gets intellectual labor and another does not, we will not have a philosophy about the latter (though this is certainly a real problem caused by OSI, and one that many feminist philosophers, including Kittay and Mills, raise).

Instead, certain ways of identifying a problem can make it very difficult to represent other problems. An argument that Kittay (1999; see also Young 1991) makes about Rawls' primary goods may help illustrate this. The principles of justice emphasize two types of inequalities: inequalities in basic liberties and inequalities in income. The second principle of justice is designed so that only income inequality can show up as a problem for justice. But what about the inequality that results from doing the type of work to which society attributes no monetary value? The inequality that caregivers face can only show up as a problem for Rawls as lack of social basis of self-respect or lack of income. Yet these descriptions distort the wrongs gender-unjust societies perpetrate against caregivers.

The theoretical options for doing justice to caregivers in Rawls' framework are thus divided into two: ignore because there is no "place" for the concerns about this in the theory (or the "place" is in the judicial stage, but this also proves the point), or shoehorn them into categories they do not fit well. With a theory thus constructed, it is unsurprising that the normative output that takes the form of the principles of justice that fail to achieve justice for

caregivers. A world with full compliance would easily be one with plenty of oppression of dependency workers and one where dependency work remained feminized. Even if we choose the shoehorning option and try to make care a primary good (a strategy Kittay suggests but also describes as limited), it is unclear how the second principle will work, given that with multiple indicators of disadvantage, we will be unable to find the “least well off.”

There is another way that problem-framing influenced by OSI can get in the way of developing anti-oppressive prescriptions, one that is more performative. Simply put, a distorted perception of the problem can come to be widely *believed to be* the actual problem. The resultant sedimented beliefs can, in turn, thwart the development of better moral and political concepts. This has been a consistent argument in feminist writing on equality, including Mills'. Mills thinks that, given the political discourse that has been operating in Western countries since at least contractarianism's inception, Rawls' work entrenches the belief that the citizens of Western democracies are already treated equally (Mills 1997). This is not the place to get into the issue of whether this is a correct interpretation of the role of equality in contractarianism, but clearly, believing that we should all be treated the same, or that we are already equal in the status quo, will impede our ability to successfully employ any moral theory that refers to the equality of persons.

Feminist philosophers have long pointed out instances like these—cases where misdescription of the world caused by OSI at the level of theoretical input results in normative prescriptions that justify or ignore oppression. In my view, this reveals something important about our philosophical project. Feminists have always thought that the right normative prescriptions are sensitive to the right facts. OSI is a mechanism through which the dominant

positionality of the philosopher, or his existence in an oppressive society, can cause us to get the facts wrong. But getting the facts wrong is only a concern if our theory wants to do something in the world.

The type of fact-sensitivity I am attributing to feminist philosophy is related to action guidance but is not identical with more narrow construals of it. Rejecting OSI does not entail telling individual agents what to do at the level of decisionmaking, having direct “policy relevance” or emphasizing short-term goals. It means only aiming to generate principles that can help make the world better than it is. This broad construal is, I think, as it should be. As will become clear in the next section, this broad notion of action guidance is necessary to capture the breath of feminist normative theory including the branch that is not directly prescriptive, and that is instead interested in “naturalizing” ethics (Jaggar 2000) and examining the effects of ethical theories, and to preserve their normative relevance.

### **Characterizing Feminist Philosophy: Methods or Normative Content?**

So, the reason to resist OSI is that one wants to change the world, or at least see how to change it. But, one might object, there is a simpler and more commonsense view of why feminism is action-guiding. Isn't feminism just a set of commitments to make the world better? If it is, why do we need the discussion of salience idealization to begin with, and how does it add to the commonsense view?

If the answer to the first question is affirmative, it suggests that feminism is different from other types of first-order normative commitments. We do not say, for example, that being a Kantian means telling people how to treat persons as ends. Nor do we say that being a liberal means generating principles that rid the world of illiberalism. Philosophers have been happy to

say that one can be a liberal and produce utopian theory. It is commonly said about other moral theories that all we want them to do is to help us see that our actual world is deficient, not what to do about it. It is also said that the job of moral theories is to generate principles for ideal or idealized agents.

So why would feminism be different? We can speculate that a certain type of “activist” person tends to do feminist philosophy, but this explanation is flimsy. The path to connecting feminism to nonideal theory is going to have to refuse to reduce feminism to a set of normative beliefs. This is not an untrodden path; it is one that reflects the way most feminist scholars have always understood themselves. Feminist academic work is usually understood to involve *methodological* commitments. The first-order normative commitments of feminism have to do with the wrongness of oppression. These moral views are undoubtedly necessary for feminism, anti-racism, and so on. What is less clear is whether they are sufficient for it, or, more specifically for being a feminist or antiracist theorist.

One way to motivate the idea that feminist philosophy is characterized by methods and not just normative commitments is to note that opposition to oppression is arguably also part of most mainstream moral and political views—and certainly of forms of liberalism. Contemporary liberals argue that persons are equal regardless of their race and gender. They also argue that something is wrong with social and political conditions that make a person’s access to advantage dependent on luck. I do not want to press this point too far, because thinking oppression is wrong may turn out to entail more than that people are equal and discrimination is bad. But I think the basic point that someone could think that oppression was not good without being a feminist is relatively intuitive. If it is not intuitive for you about



feminist politics or persons, consider the special case of feminist *theory*. Surely, there is a difference between being a *nonsexist* theorist and being a *feminist* one.

So what is the difference between feminist philosophy and philosophy that seeks to arrive at nonsexist conclusions? Feminist inquiry is informed by certain methodological commitments, often casually described as some version of “putting women at the center of our thinking.” This has of course become refined as feminist theory has grown, to acknowledge the fact that there is not a single women’s experience, that many women are multiply oppressed<sup>9</sup>, and that some of those oppressed by sexism are trans and nonbinary people. But the core has remained that we must see the world from the perspective of the oppressed.

My characterization of philosophical feminism as a set of methods opposed to OSI captures the actual projects feminist normative theorists have engaged in better than the alternative view that reduces it to the belief that oppression is bad. Much feminist normative theory argues, like Mills’ and Kittay’s, that we should reconceive moral and political philosophy’s terrain to include things like the ideological function of normative concepts. Where most of the energy in mainstream moral philosophy has gone into directly analyzing and evaluating the content of moral judgments, feminist philosophers have devoted significant energy to discussing what moral and political theories help (and do not help) us *see*. Feminists tend to examine moral and political theories in their role as heuristics that coordinate action and guide social practices (whether they are only this is of course up for debate). Like all heuristics, then, their usefulness and the desirability of retaining them depends partly on what elements of social reality they illuminate and which they obscure. As Margaret Urban Walker

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<sup>9</sup> See Crenshaw 1989.

puts it, “morality bears a far greater descriptive and empirical burden...than is commonly thought” (Walker 2007: 13)

My view that feminist normative theory opposes OSI helps explain why feminist ethics has always taken changing how we see to be germane to normative theorizing. This interest in how moral theories illuminate and obscure was central to what might be called “first-generation” Anglo-American feminist ethics (though it is also on display in Mills and Kittay). In the 1980s, for example, Walker argued that we needed to think of moral theories as aiming to “represent” the practices of actual moral communities, and that an upshot of this is that they were susceptible to illuminate the problems of some and not others (Walker 2007). Around the same time, Cheshire Calhoun argued that feminism called for attention to the “nonlogical implications” of mainstream moral philosophy, which, she thought included the view that the caring virtues that dominated many women’s lives were not potential sites of serious moral inquiry (Calhoun 1988).

This is not to deny that feminists engage in direct conversation about first-order normative claims. But we rarely limit ourselves to this, and rarely do so detached from empirical social analysis. This is because it is relevant to the evaluation of first-order normative claims is what forms of life they enable and whose interests they serve. If we need to know what moral and political concepts do in order to evaluate them, then some portion of feminist philosophy will always be about looking out at the world.

It may be that oppression’s influence on our thinking is so deep-rooted that we need to do a lot of technical and abstract work to think in a way that does not reproduce oppression. Because of this, even feminist “utopian” theorizing can be understood as related to action

guidance or means-end effectiveness. This is not the place to take up this point at length, but much feminist utopian theorizing does not aim to represent an alternative world we should actually aim to achieve. It is rather pedagogical, representing an alternative, usually absurd, world that is not really the one we desire to reveal what we are failing to see about this one. Rather than offering “realistic” (or unrealistic) utopias, it aims to expose how our views about what is “realistic” may themselves be infected by our susceptibility to internalizing the views of the dominant.

Still, one might reply that feminists want to change how we see the world for a different reason, one unrelated to action guidance. Tessman (Tessman 2010) and Norlock (Norlock 2016) argue that feminists should avoid focusing on action guidance, because we want moral theory to reveal the tragedy of injustice, not to be, to borrow a phrase from Norlock, “an instructional repair manual” (Norlock 2016, 494).<sup>10</sup> Their view that feminism should help us see what is wrong with, rather than merely how to act under, our nonideal conditions, is utterly compelling.

At the same time, however, part of a feminist analysis is to recognize that oppression is a special type of misfortune, caused by human action. The tragedy of Oedipus killing his father is different in kind from the tragedy of the caregiver who can find no social supports that will allow her and her child to flourish. The former calls for mourning and catharsis, but the latter calls for outrage at the humanly-caused character of injustice. But once we acknowledge the humanly-caused character of oppression, it is difficult to come up with a story about why normative theories should ignore it. Of course, doing something about oppression does not,

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<sup>10</sup> Norlock is using this phrase to make a different point, which I address directly in my discussion of her below.

and usually should not, take the form of burdening individual agents with responsibility for change, at least not those already burdened by oppression and its effects. Rather than suggesting that feminists should eschew action guidance, I view Tessman's and Norlock's arguments as calling us to broaden the notion of action guidance beyond short-term individual action, as my characterization of feminist philosophy as seeking means-end consistency through fact-sensitivity does.

### **Competing Explanations of Feminism's Nonideality: End-State Theorizing and Abstraction**

My argument so far has been that feminist philosophy is nonideal because opposition to OSI reveals an underlying desire for a certain type of fact-sensitive (means-end consistent) theory. Mine is not the first attempt to establish a connection between feminist and nonideal theory via conversations about abstraction and idealization, but I will argue in this section that it establishes the connection more persuasively than the alternatives. In "Ideal Theory as Ideology," Mills argues that it is ideal theory's idealizing character that makes it serve the interests of the dominant. Anti-oppressive theories must be nonideal, he argues, because ideal theorizing "exclude[es], or at least, marginal[izes] the actual" (Mills 2005).

#### *Mills' Critique of the Ideal-as-Idealized Model*

Mills makes a number of distinct connections between idealization and oppression. They range from the claim that idealizations do not tell us how to improve our unjust world (Mills 2005: 170), to the claim that members of oppressed and subordinated groups have dispreferred such ideals (Mills 2005: 170), to the claim that they "weirdly detach the normative and the prescriptive" (Mills 2005: 171). The argument he makes at the greatest length, however, and the one that is his explicit thesis, is that idealization involves treating ideals as

models (Mills 2005, 166). Idealization, for Mills, like O'Neill, involves stipulating. It imagines the best, or at least a very good, version of, the object we are theorizing about. So, for example, the image of society as an agreement among equals offered by contractarianism is an idealization in the sense that it imagines a society that is better than the one we have.

This is what idealization is, but Mills seems to think that pernicious idealization involves something more: *treating* an ideal as a model (or as he puts it, using the "ideal-as-idealized model"). To treat an ideal as a model is to treat our idealization of *p* as "an exemplar of what an ideal *p* should be like" (Mills 2005: 167). Once we start assuming the ideal is close enough to actual reality to be a live possibility for it, Mills argues, we end up with two problems. First, we "tacitly" represent "the actual as a simple deviation from the ideal, not worth theorizing in its own right" (Mills 2005: 168). Second, he claims treating the ideal as a model suggests that "starting from the ideal is at least the best way of realizing it" (Mills 2005: 168). Both claims are plausible (and, in my view, accurate) about legacy of Rawlsian political philosophy. It seems clear that late twentieth century Anglo-American political philosophers did not think we were far off from a society that treated people as free and equal. Rawls himself described Western societies as "more or less just" in his late work. It also seems clear that many thought guiding us *towards* our "realistic utopia" was just not the job of philosophy.

However, these results do not establish that feminist philosophy is a critique of idealization, because they do not issue from idealization itself. Even if they did, it is not clear that regarding the world as deviant is bad from an anti-oppressive perspective. The truth of the claim that ideals make us treat the ills in our world as "simple deviations" depends largely on the meaning of the word "deviation." It is true that a highly idealized vision of a person or

society requires us to see the real world as deviant in the sense of “falls short.” On the other hand, if “deviation” means “minor difference,” it is less clear that idealization must lead to this, and less still that the idealization is bad. The Marxist ideal of a classless society, or the anarchist ideal of a society where government is unnecessary, for example, idealize while showing us that our society falls *far* short. It may be objected that liberatory theorists do not *start from* such ideals. This is true, but my point is only that even very lofty ideals do not force us to think the real world is better than it is.

Perhaps Mills only means to argue that idealization makes it seem like the actual world has fallen short *to* some degree. But it is unclear why this would be bad. Much of Mills’ point about Rawls, and the social contract in general, is that actual society is not as these ideals paint it. I think we should want ideals that tell us that our society falls short. The idea we should reject theories that create a gap between the ideal and the actual would prove too much; part of the point of normative inquiry in general, and certainly feminist normative inquiry, is to support the conclusion that something is wrong with the world we live in.

So perhaps the real bite of Mills’ argument about ideals and models lies in the notion that idealization makes us think that “starting from the ideal is the best way of realizing it.” It is worth noting that this point only makes sense if the ideal is of a certain sort, and of a sort that has featured prominently in the literature on nonideal theory—what is often referred to as an end-state ideal. Only an end-state ideal is capable of being formulated as “something to be realized” in contrast with the process of achieving it. To think of an ideal as something to be achieved is to turn it into an end-state, perhaps not *the* end-state, as in perfection, but a desirable state of affairs. Mills’ observation that end-state theories do not tell us “how to get

there from here” is important, and other nonideal theorists such as Amartya Sen (Sen 2009), Walker (Walker 2007), and I (2018) have also argued that this limits the usefulness of end state theorizing for feminists. But it seems clear, as Tommie Shelby argues (Shelby 2013), that one can have an end-state ideal without thinking that it is the only necessary element of a normative theory; one can have both end-state and transitional ideals. Again here, the problem seems to be with more with the assumptions that accompany the ideal than with the idealization if itself.

If my analysis of Mills is right, neither stipulation idealization, nor the subspecies of it that involves end-state theorizing, is the real reason ideal theorizing justifies oppression. Other ideas, especially the non-normative assumption that the world is not too far off from the ideal, are doing the work that supports Mills’ conclusion that anti-oppressive philosophical work should be nonideal. The problem with the Rawlsian apparatus is not primarily that it tells us about an end-state, or a particularly good end-state; it is that Rawls and many of his followers seemed to think that our society was similar to that end-state and thought that many “small tweaks” it would take to fix our society were philosophically uninteresting. Rawls imagines an end-state in which the problems of white supremacy and subpersons are absent, rather than solved or in need of perpetual work (contrast this with how he sees economic inequality). The fact that most practitioners of philosophy have been elite white men who are immune to the harms of white supremacy has contributed to this way of seeing.

These are all points that Mills makes; they are just not the key moves in his explicit argument about idealization. My conception of oppressive salience idealization more directly captures the link between the positionality of philosophers and the belief that the world is

better than it is; philosophers from dominant groups are more likely to take the problems that affect them as normative theoretical inputs, and it is not surprising that the outputs are not well-tailored to solving oppression.

*Schwartzman's Critique of Abstraction*

A different story about why feminists need to be nonideal theorists is offered by Schwartzman. Schwartzman argues, contra Mills and O'Neill, that it is our critique of abstraction that makes feminists nonideal theorists. At some points, Schwartzman suggests that abstraction is the bracketing of "information that is crucial to understanding the sources of oppression" (Schwartzman 2006: 567). This happens when, for example, we wonder why women are learning less than men without thinking about how our society distributes and values dependency work. At others, drawing on the feminist valorization of the "concrete experiences of women" (Schwartzman 2006: 583), Schwartzman describes abstraction as excessive distance from reality. She claims that feminism is nonabstract in that it builds up from the particular rather than seeking to apply general principles (Schwartzman 2006; see also 2009). In the first definition, Schwartzman seems to define abstraction by its elimination of content of a certain sort; in the other usages, she seems to use it to refer to what Mari Mikkola calls "distancing," reflection on cases that are very different from reality and that isolate the putatively normative features of phenomena.

The clearest way to make sense of Schwartzman's divergent characterizations of abstraction is to take her to define abstraction as consisting in the ignoring of oppression, caused by excessive distance from concrete reality (rather than, for example, ignoring of



oppression caused by the belief that it is not bad).<sup>11</sup> This understanding of abstraction enables Schwartzman to make two claims about how abstraction undermines anti-oppressive ends. First, Schwartzman claims that we will not know how to solve social problems if we begin from thinking of them as instances to which to apply pre-established concepts and principles. We must instead begin from looking at the social problems themselves. For example, she argues that we need to know about how pornography affects women in order to theorize about it. Considering it abstractly will lead us to instead assimilate it to the category of “something that has the power to offend by depicting sex” (Schwartzman 2006: 578). Second, Schwartzman argues that abstraction leads philosophers to focus on imagined problems rather than real ones. Her example of this is Elizabeth Anderson’s well-known critique of luck egalitarianism, a school of thought seemingly more interested in trying to solve the problems caused by imagined surfers and wine connoisseurs than those caused by racism and sexism.

This means that there are two reasons that feminists need to be nonideal theorists available to Schwartzman. First, if nonideal theory is just theory that does not ignore oppression, then being a nonideal theorist is part of the definition of feminism. This reasoning basically operates by making feminist and nonideal mean the same thing, or more precisely, by making “nonideal” mean the same thing as “anti-oppressive,” an equation Schwartzman has also suggested in more recent work on the topic (Schwartzman 2016). There she argues that

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<sup>11</sup> Only a normatively laden understanding of abstraction can support Schwartzman’s criticism of O’Neill. Schwartzman’s stated argument is that O’Neill is wrong that idealization causes theories to perpetuate oppression, since idealization is inevitable, and since ideals can help us see how we should change society. But Schwartzman says that abstraction and idealization are both inevitable, so there must be a reason she shifts from the terrain of idealization to the terrain of abstraction. The most plausible reason for the shift is that she sees a deep association between how close to the ground a theory is and how much it reflects the interests of the dominant.

feminist usage of the term “nonideal” is different from the mainstream usage. According to her, feminists, including Mills and the pioneers in feminist ethics like Alison Jaggar, think of ideal theory more as *ideological* theory—as theory that issues normative recommendations that ignore or reinforce oppression (Schwartzman 2016: 5).

Though this redefinition of nonideal rightly makes clear that feminists were doing something novel before the mainstream caught on, it makes the term “nonideal theory” redundant, and thus makes the question of whether feminists should be nonideal theorists trivial. Though I have no independent interest in maintaining the terms of the mainstream, it seems that much of the nonideal theory debate is about more than anti-oppressiveness (and perhaps sadly, may not even have anything to do with oppression at all). Terminological disputes aside, if there is some kind of interesting question to be asked about whether feminism needs to be action-guiding, or about the *type* of theory feminism should be, redefining nonideal theory as a set of first-order normative commitments will not help us answer it.

There is a second explanation of why feminists should be nonideal theorists to which Schwartzman’s argument lends itself. It is that theorizing “closer to the ground,” and taking the perspective of the oppressed seriously will produce theory that is less likely to perpetuate oppression. The second part of this second explanation is, once it is stripped of the abstraction terminology, similar to my conception of oppressive salience idealization. However, there are important reasons to avoid using the word “abstract” to describe theory that ignores the perspective of the oppressed. It is simply unclear that theory that is concrete, or closer to the ground, or more particular, is less likely to be oppressive. Oppressiveness and nonconcreteness

do not track each other neatly. Schwartzman uses perception that abortion is about privacy rights (Schwartzman 2006: 578) as an example of oppressive abstraction. It is clear to me that abortion should be conceived primarily from the perspective of women and people capable of gestation. It is also clear to me that thinking of abortion primarily as something that allows women to prevent men from having the children they want (as some men's rights activists would have it) is wrong. Yet the difference between these views is not aptly described as a difference in concreteness. Given this, one wonders what is theoretically gained by attributing the problem to abstraction—and not more directly to a false view of the world.

If the need to separate the falsity of the views of the world that end up supporting oppression from their concreteness is not compelling in its own right, it may help to note that lumping the two together undermines the substantive point of longstanding feminist critiques of abstraction. The majority of these have always really been critiques of *false* abstractions, and more precisely of the particular and concrete masquerading as the abstract. Think of the feminist argument that the “abstract” human person is an independent man. In Kittay's version, the person is modeled as someone who does not have to personally care for dependents. But the experience of being a breadwinner is no more abstract than the experience of a caregiver. Instead, breadwinning is being portrayed as abstract (and universal) when it is in fact concrete and parochial to elite men. For feminist critiques like Kittay's to have bite, we need to be able to say that sexist and racist pictures of the person and the social world are not very abstract at all. To concede that the position of the dominant is abstract is to play into the process of effacing the role social conditions played in making their way of looking at the world seem true to begin with.

So Schwartzman's account of the feminist/nonideal theory connection either empties the latter term of distinctiveness or obscures the fact that oppressive theories often spring from the concrete realities of the dominant. My view that feminists oppose OSI, and that the latter reveals a commitment to fact-sensitive theory, is in the spirit of Schwartzman's and Mills' arguments for the feminist/nonideal connection without taking on their downsides. Normative theories end up justifying oppression because they are responses to the problems people in positions of dominance identify as problems, and their characterization of them. OSI can occur from the level of problem-framing to the level of "application" and is not unique to end-state theories or to particularly abstract ones. Rather than treating non-normative assumptions about modeling or abstraction as intermediaries, my view cuts directly to the point that view of the dominant is likely to be distorting and false and explains why this matters for normative theorizing.

### **Is Feminist Philosophy Circular?**

My view has been that the feminist commitment to changing how we see reveals an underlying orientation to fitting normative prescriptions to the actual world. The hegemony of the problems and experiences of the dominant gets in the way of perceiving many moral and political problems we face, perceiving the ones we do perceive rightly, and developing normative prescriptions relevant to them. Feminists want to peel this layer of distortion away. The motivation for seeing the world from the perspective of the oppressed within my view is clearly moralized; we want to change the way we see the world because we think oppression is bad. This may raise a worry about the entailments of my view—it may seem that my conception of feminist philosophy puts it in the business of presupposing moral commitments,

not producing and evaluating them. It may even seem that feminist ethics is not genuinely normative theorizing, because the normativity is partly in the process, rather than in the product, of the theory.

The first thing to note about this worry is that it is far from unique to feminist normative theory, either in general or as I have characterized it. After all, it is usually the possibility of deriving normative judgments from descriptive ones that is seen as suspect. But it may be argued that the issue is less with the having of normative judgments than the lack of an independent justification of the concern with oppression. Since I am just explaining what feminist normative theory is, rather than explaining why anyone should adopt its methods, it is not incumbent on me to offer an independent explanation of the wrongness of oppression. More to the point, however, it is unclear why we would need one, since my account needs only the *fact* that oppression is wrong. I am assuming the wrongness of oppression is a fixed point in our intuitions, but this should be uncontroversial. The term “oppression” is no more morally neutral than the term “justice,” and to demand that the theorist assume its neutrality would be a strange demand indeed.<sup>12</sup> Most approaches to normative theorizing ask us to seek a fit between the pretheoretical sense that some set of things are wrong and the contents of the theory. Further, as feminist theorists argue, there are special reasons to rely on pretheoretical intuitions of the oppressed in an unjust world. If our conceptual repertoire is ideologically distorted, those who object to or suffer from oppression will often have to appeal to a felt sense of wrongness to begin the work of theory (see Collins 1990; MacKinnon 1989: 83–106).

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<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer from this journal for suggesting this line of response to me.

It is also worth clarifying the role commitment to opposing oppression plays in feminist philosophy. Feminists have a substantive normative commitment to opposing oppression and a commitment to trying to see the world from the perspective of the oppressed. The role opposition to oppression plays in feminism is analogous to those the concepts of the person and rationality—both normative—play in constructivist moral theories. Constructivists argue, at least on one well-known formulation, that morality tries to solve the problem of developing mutually acceptable principles to govern our conduct, given the circumstances of justice and given the type of end-setting beings we are (O'Neill 1989). In both the constructivism and feminism cases, the choice of theoretical inputs is partly value-driven; the conception of the person as an end-setting being is hardly an empirical observation, and even less so is the aim of generating of principles of cooperation.

If, on the other hand, the worry is that feminists are wrongly assuming there are cases of oppression in the world where there are none, the objector needs to be able to explain why we should presume that our existing theories, and the people who construct them, are better equipped to interpret empirical reality. There are reasons independent of feminism to want to reduce our reliance on the perspectives and problems of the dominant. Irrespective of our metaethical commitments, philosophers frequently justify normative claims by referring to “our” intuitions. But in a variegated and unequal social world, we likely do not share all the same intuitions. If our intuitions are related to our life experiences and affected by our positions in a social hierarchy, we should wonder about the adequacy of inquiry conducted mostly by members of dominant groups who are conversant in traditions upheld by members of dominant groups. The problem of bias is compounded when we acknowledge that not only

different intuitions, but different empirical facts will be ready-to-hand for members of different social groups. Sally Haslanger (2020) makes this point, albeit in the context of a narrower criticism of applied ethics. If philosophers think that the effects of their positionality on their theorizing is negligible, and also think that the empirical facts on which their theories depend are so limited as to be obvious to everyone, “the method builds in a status quo bias... If we don’t have an uncontroversial description of the phenomenon in question, or don’t have an agreed upon normative vocabulary for making judgements about it, then the method treats it as outside the scope of the project and offers no resources for addressing it” (Haslanger forthcoming). To explicitly state the converse, a reliable moral philosophical method would be capable of recognizing when it was infected by parochial intuitions and observations.

Beginning from a commitment to opposing oppression and domination can also help reveal something else that is key to moral inquiry, but that is often given short shrift in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy—what our moral concepts do in the world. If normative concepts function at least partly to enable coordination and shared understanding, we should be interested in the social practices they enable and block. As Amia Srinivasan puts it, we want to know “what our representational systems do; which practices they emerge from and help sustain, how they are mobilized by power, whom and what they bring into existence, and which possibilities they foreclose” (Srinivasan 2019: 180). The possible (and likely) extensions and applications of any moral concept or theory do not usually become evident by examining the theory alone. Applying a theory with highly general empirical assumptions in our minds may not get us much farther. Sometimes we need to know what the effects of a concept or theory look like from the perspective of the nondominant in order to really lay bare that

concept or theory's effects. As Kittay argues, the idea of economic independence looks much less appealing when we see the havoc it has wreaked on women on welfare, who encounter onerous barriers to surviving while parenting. As Mills does, the ideal of society as a mutual system of cooperation looks like nothing short of a slavery-disappearing scheme when viewed from the eyes of those forced to "cooperate" but relegated to the status of subpersons.

But perhaps the worry is really that if we start from a commitment to opposing oppression and domination, feminist philosophers will not discover anything new. This worry is plainly unfounded. Beginning from a prereflective normative commitment, or even a very broad but explicit moral principle, does not imply that we know what its applications or extensions are. Nor does it imply that we know why, where, or when the principle is correct—or even that it is not subject to revision. Principles and concepts can also become better articulated as we use them to respond to and navigate empirical situations. If part of how ideals emerge is as proposed solutions to the moral and social problems of our age, figuring out whether our ideals are the right ones is partly a matter of looking at what happens in the world when we adopt them, and whether they help us navigate the problems we are facing (see Anderson 2013; Phillips 2018; Khader 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Seeing the world through the eyes of the dominant, and with their interests at heart (OSI), prevents us from constructing normative theories that respond to our actual moral and political problems. This, on my view, is what feminist philosophers think, and it is what makes us nonideal theorists. In characterizing normative theory as corruptible by the wrong factual inputs, we imply that the right kind of normative theory is fact-sensitive. Feminist normative



theory devote energy to repairing the way we see the world, because we want a moral theory that is tailored to doing something about the world as it is.

My view vindicates feminist dissatisfaction with the way mainstream Anglo-American philosophy seems too “divorced from the real world” and from the experiences of oppressed groups. It does so in a way that makes clear how failing to see the real world can impact, not just applications of theories, but their theoretical inputs and resultant normative prescriptions. It vindicates these feminist intuitions without falling prey to stock criticisms that paint feminists as hostile to abstraction, or to normative theorizing as such. My view also offers a plausible story about what it means to say feminists have been doing nonideal theory all along. Anti-oppressive theorizing does not merely reside in adhering to the first-order normative commitment that oppression is bad. It is about recognizing and revealing how oppressive ways of seeing can affect the content and acceptability of normative prescriptions. Changing how we see the world, something that has long been central to feminist methods, is part of thinking about what we *should do* in it.

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