

Chapter 2

Ethical Reasons and Political Commitments

Lisa Rivera

Abstract Political commitments to resist oppression play a central role in the moral lives of many people. Such commitments are also a source of ethical reasons. They influence and organize ethical beliefs, emotions and reasons in an ongoing way. Political commitments to address oppression often contain a concern for the dignity and well-being of others and the objects of political commitments often have value, according to ideal moral theories, such as Kantian and utilitarian theory. However, ideal moral theories do not fully explain the ethical reasons political commitments engender. First, ideal moral theories do not explain the normative priority that agents give to politically committed ethical reasons. Their profound effect on a politically committed agent's ethical deliberation and choice and the precedence they are given over other ends cannot be wholly understood through the moral obligations within ideal theories. Second, although politically committed reasons are valuable in ideal theory for the benefits they bring to others, they are not fungible with other reasons ideal theory would regard as having equal ethical value. A person might substitute another beneficial humanitarian aim for that to which she is politically committed and nevertheless regard herself as having done a morally wrong thing for failing or betraying her commitment. Politically committed ethical reasons are also motivated and informed by the social location of agents and their relationship to structures of oppression. Although there are universal ethical reasons to oppose oppression, this means that some of a person's actual ethical reasons will be irreducibly particular.

Keywords Ethics·Obligation·Oppression·Moral reasons·Moral theory

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2.1 Introduction

Berta Cáceres, a Honduran citizen and Lenca activist, is the coordinator of COPINH, the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, which represents indigenous people in the Lenca territory of Honduras.

COPINH has been engaged in a long-term struggle that is both local and transnational: fighting both to gain Lenca autonomy within Honduran borders, and to oppose the neo-liberal economic and military policy that has a devastating effect on the Lenca and other indigenous peoples in Central America. COPINH has a long history of political action but most recently focused its energy on preventing the building of the El Tigre hydroelectric dam, which is displacing the Lenca and many others.¹

I met Berta in 2001 in Quebec City, while she was on a speaking tour in Canada prior to a major protest during a hemispheric trade meeting. Over the course of several days of conversation, Berta discussed her life history and the choices she made to continue her political work even when opportunities arose for an easier or safer life. She, her family, and her comrades, have endured political persecution as a result of her activism.² She has also refused jobs sponsored by the powerful institutions she opposes, such as the World Bank. Although this work would have provided income for her family, she saw the offers as attempts to co-opt movement leaders.

Berta's work rallies international support for the cause of Lenca autonomy and survival. Thus, her work is partly an act of moral suasion: she aims to convince people who may have no knowledge or interest in the issues that concern her to use their own social, political, and economic power as American or Canadian citizens to support her cause. She must also try to engage national and international powers in the hope that they will come to respect Lenca concerns. Further, she has to create local awareness of the larger global context within which the local struggles are taking place. She sees her struggle in the larger context of similar struggles of oppressed people and makes alliances with other indigenous and political groups.

Although our political commitments may be less exigent than Berta's, many of us orient our lives around them. Here, I will focus primarily on people whose lives and choices are shaped by their political commitment to address sex, race, class, or other oppressions. For such people, political commitment is fundamental to ethical deliberation and choice. If we have political commitments ourselves or experience their importance in others' lives, it should be obvious that political commitments are straightforwardly an important part of the ethical lives people hope to lead. Yet, they tend to be invisible in traditional moral theorizing. In this chapter, I offer evidence to support Charles Mills' (2000) concern in "Ideal Theory" as Ideology' that moral theory in its idealizing form is silent on oppression and that this silence will distort or erase 'the actual workings of injustice in human interactions and social institutions' (168). The problem at issue here is that moral agents' experiences of injustice, their interpretations of those experiences, and their relationships to unjust and oppressive social institutions, all play critical roles

in the ethical reasons they form.

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Politically committed reasons arise out of agents' particular relationships to oppressive circumstances, and from their interpretation of encounters with structures of social, political and economic power. Many of the objects of these political commitments have moral value under consequentialist and deontological theory, which are my focus here. In spite of the moral value they might assign certain political concerns, such theories distort and misrepresent people's reasons for pursuing these aims.³ In ideal theory, an agent's own politically committed reasons will appear useful merely as additional incentives for moral action, or they will be morally irrelevant. Second, ideal moral theory misunderstands the ethical nature of agents' attachment to the objects of their commitment. Ethical reasons that arise from political commitment cannot be understood solely from within ideal theory's framework of ethical reasons. A person's social location with respect to oppression plays an essential role in the process of forming and living out their political commitments. If we are to understand the relationship between political commitment and ethical reasons, we must allow that social location plays a role in the construction of people as moral subjects. Political commitment reveals to us ways our social location may be ethically relevant and shapes our subsequent ethical reasons to oppose injustice or to work for political transformation.

2.2 Political Commitment and Ethical Reasons

The politically committed person desires to effect some change in the social, political and/or economic order that she judges as unjust and oppressive. Political commitment need not be self-consciously political in the sense that the individual must be able to describe it as political or see it as such.⁴ Political commitment can be a significant part of someone's ethical outlook and moral self-evaluation; indeed, some people frame their political commitments in ethical, rather than political, terms. When political ends and concerns shape ethical choices in an ongoing way, these ethical concerns will also be political commitments.

Political commitments that frame a person's ethical outlook and choices have at least four features in common. (1) They arise out of someone's dissatisfaction with the current social and political order. (2) Their goal is to address a significant element in the social and political order (e.g., governmental or international institutions and policies), unjust differences in persons' social and economic power, or the causes and effects of racist, sexist, classist or other forms of oppression. (3) They cause a person to evaluate her life and actions (and sometimes, the lives and actions of others) in light of the ways these contribute to,

and are consistent with, the goals of her commitment. (4) She is motivated to act on this evaluation such that these commitments play a meaningful role in shaping and focusing her ethical outlook, deliberation and choice.

In claiming that ideal moral theories distort or ignore the ethical reasons that political commitment engenders, I do not mean that such theories regard the objects of those reasons as either immoral or entirely outside the scope of morality. People who have reasons to pursue certain basic objects of political commitment to address

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oppression will often be able to justify those reasons under some consideration available within deontological and consequentialist theories.⁵ I am not concerned here with any and all political commitments, but rather with political commitments that intend to free people from, or at least help them cope with, oppression. Such actions will also promote human dignity, alleviate suffering, promote well being and create conditions where people can flourish. The political commitments considered here will bring about good ends; it is right that we pursue them.

It is not surprising, therefore, that ideal theories have some account of why the objects of these commitments are morally valuable. For example, oppression harms people, and reasons to address certain aspects of these harms will be morally permissible, and sometimes morally required, under ideal moral theories.⁶ And, if they are not, their impermissibility will stem primarily from the other moral ends someone might pursue as an alternative, or from conflict with other moral requirements, rather than from a conflict between the account of the right and the good and the object of the commitment. However, the abstract assessment we might make of their moral value from the standpoint of ideal theory is itself an idealization that distorts the ground for these reasons. Without an account of the relationship that agents believe they have to oppression itself, we cannot fully explain or justify people's commitments, the reasons they elicit or the extensive effects they have on their lives. When we overlook the role of social location in the construction of the moral subject, as ideal theory requires us to do, we also fail to see how socially located experiences shape ethical reasons.

Since the goals of the political commitments that matter here have an ethical value (abstractly conceived) that is not usually in question within ideal moral theory, the burden of proof is on the person who wants to deny that our reasons to pursue political commitments are ethical reasons. Under any neutral understanding of such reasons, these are ethical reasons. A full account of what constitutes the moral would beg the question here since the account one gives depends on the moral theory one favors.⁷ However, politically committed reasons do have many

features that are recognized as characteristic of ethical reasons. Political commitments are normative considerations that people freely accept or adopt. People intend to have the value their political commitments express bear on current and future choices. In other words, they are prescriptive in some sense even if they are more open-ended and fluid than general principles. They are also the result of reflection and can be revised in the face of both personal and collective reflection. Hence, they are responsive to reasons.⁸

When we are concerned with the political, we are also concerned with the social order, more particularly the structures of power that determine human relations and the effects these structures have on human beings. When we turn our ethical focus to the political, we evaluate and assess, and affirm or reject, the form these structures take in virtue of their effects on human beings. Such ethical conclusions transform our reasons for action as well as our moral emotions and attitudes. We feel indignation about our shared oppression or anger towards those who benefit from it. If we ourselves benefit from oppression, we may feel shame or guilt. Political commitment orders and organizes this complex of moral belief, emotions and reasons in an

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ongoing way. It is a continuous source of ethical reasons. When we are politically committed, we resolve to go on to further our understanding of political structures and to reflect on our ethical beliefs and attitudes in order to better address political oppression through action.

Therefore, we can see that political commitment is a site where the ethical intersects with the political, and does so in two significant ways. First, it involves an ethical evaluation of political structures and effects. Second, a person's ethical assessment of herself and the reasons she has are shaped by her views on the relationship she has to these structures of power. Her ethical reasons are therefore responsive to her judgments about what political structures do to people, including herself, and what she is responsible for in light of her relation to these political structures. These reasons may ultimately have diverse sources, although they primarily arise out of politically relevant experiences of structural effects and our attachment and concern for others who experience similar effects. For example, we may have a sense of responsibility toward those who share our political fate, particularly in cases of shared oppression.

It is this second relationship between our experience of political effects and our ethical reasons that ideal theory tends to obscure—that the basis for an ethical reason itself may lie in our understanding of our relationship to these political structures. On these views, the source of ethical reasons cannot account either for the ways our relationships to these political structures differ or for their profound

effect on our ethical outlook.

Political commitment is rarely a purely individual phenomenon. Political commitment to address oppression usually occurs because a person identifies with, and participates in, some collective understanding such as a liberatory social movement. It is almost always grounded in some context of collective action with shared political objectives and methods. Collective action is also usually required for political commitment to be effective. Personal motivation for political commitment will be enhanced, or even dependent upon, a person's knowledge that others share her goals.

Nevertheless, political commitment results from the choice of individual agents, so it has an important individual dimension. It is also an ethical choice and a way that individuals orient themselves ethically in the world. The beliefs and goals of politically committed agents have ethical content as well. A person working for the 'Justice for Janitors' movement might be concerned with dignity, respect, fairness, and the suffering caused by poverty-level wages and lack of health care. She may judge that the treatment of janitors is wrong, the way the police and judiciary treat organizers and protesting janitors is wrong, and that the right thing to do (at a minimum) would be to pay a living wage to janitors and provide them with health care. If I am a janitor fighting for justice, these beliefs may play a critical role in the ethical reasons I have. If you are someone who benefits from the exploitation of janitors (e.g., because it keeps down the rent in your office) then the reason you have to respond to the situation of janitors as a beneficiary of exploitation may be different from my reason as a person harmed by exploitation. Your ethical reason to support janitors in this case may be shaped by your reluctance to endorse an economic structure where you benefit from the oppression of others.

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Some of our ethical reasons arise out of our particular relationship to the situation and the interplay between a political commitment and our social location is multifaceted. Each influences the other. First, our social location can play a role in motivating our commitment. Being Lenca can inspire the commitment to struggle for Lenca autonomy and survival. However, embracing a political commitment, particularly in contexts of oppression, may enjoin us to discover ways our social location is relevant for action. Reflection on this commitment will show us where our responsibility lies and this may bring us to further refine our understanding of the commitment and the actions it may require. When our standing political commitment generates ethical reasons, it is often because the political commitment causes us to realize that our relationship to the situation demands a particular response. As one janitor who is active in the Justice for Janitors movement explained, 'It's hard to fight for what you believe in. . . But I

have no choice. What kind of mother would I be if I didn't stand up for my children?'⁹ The political commitment then may go on to shape the ethical reasons we have in additional ways, in light of the belief that where we stand in relationship to the situation has significant ethical implications. For example, we may believe that, when oppressed, our position requires solidarity with others who share our political fate. As oppressors, we may choose to use our relative social privilege to struggle against a political system that provides us with a position that advantages us at the expense of others.¹⁰

2.3 Political Commitment and Ideal Theory

According to Mills, the abstraction involved in ideal-as-idealized theories makes it impossible to understand how injustice works in reality, and thus impossible to actually achieve justice. To apply these claims here: First, the need to develop standards that do not vary across cases in ideal theory will require that theories be unresponsive to the ways that actual situations of oppression shape our ethical reasons. In the case of political commitment, this will mean that the sources of reasons arising out of our interpretation of these situations are rendered invisible and irrelevant within ideal theory. The normative priority a person gives to her politically committed reasons will have to be traceable to another, higher justification. If the source lies in a person's experience of her own oppression, this will seem like a happy coincidence between a particular case and an apprehension that a general moral standard applies. If her ethical motivation to act is partly derived from concern about her relationship to structures of oppression, this would be regarded as a lucky, but indirect, source of moral motivation (in consequentialist theory) or perhaps as an unfortunate distraction from the right source of moral motivation (in Kantian theory).

Second, within actual moral practice, deviations from the ideal model will generally be regarded as random deviations, irrelevant to shaping the theory. For political commitments, this can be seen in the problem of 'moral fungibility.' Politically committed agents will not regard their projects as fungible with other equally morally valuable projects. Under ideal theory the attachment to their particular project will

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seem like a peculiar idiosyncrasy rather than being attributable to the fact that a person's conception of herself as an ethical agent may be of a piece with her commitments.

Third, in ideal theory the moral problem that oppression poses must be subsumed under a larger ethical heading (e.g., disrespect, bad consequences). This fails to

account for oppression's specific features and the roles they play in shaping agents' reasons. The specificity of our relationship to oppressive social structures will therefore seem irrelevant to our actual ethical reasons even though it may be both the cause of our possessing the reason, and the explanation for the form it takes.

Bernard Williams' (1985) arguments about the dominance of what he calls 'the morality system' shed light on the first two of these concerns. His account of the way social considerations bear on ethical reasons is also consistent with this third concern.¹¹ Williams' critiques of utilitarianism and Kantianism are sometimes read as a type of skepticism about ethics itself, but his claim that the morality system narrows down the diversity of the ethical field, warping our ethical experience, is sometimes overlooked.

The morality system is therefore a kind of idealization even if it is also 'the outlook or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us' (Williams 1985, 174). It idealizes by appearing to comprise the whole of ethics, a much more complex and often socially laden sphere that resists systematization.

According to Williams, the hallmark of morality, as opposed to ethics, is the notion of moral obligation it depends upon, and the primacy it gives to this notion. Williams says a great deal about obligation, but two points are most relevant. First, obligations are the focal point of moral deliberation. Our deliberation either issues in an obligation or indicates permissibility because we do not violate an obligation. Further, obligation shapes our deliberation such that it will generally be about discrete situations and about what to do in such situations.¹² The particular obligations I determine I have at specific times will be subsumed under a general obligation, 'so if I am now under an obligation to do something that would be for the best, this will be because I have some general obligation, perhaps among others, to do what is for the best' (Williams 1985, 175.) If we feel obligated to support a particular cause, 'we are left with the limp suggestion that one is under an obligation to assist some important cause on occasions that are especially propitious for assisting it' (Williams 1985, 181). He calls this 'the obligation-out, obligation-in principle.' Moral obligation is 'inescapable.' Not only am I required to do what I am obliged to do but I can only justify failing to act on the obligation if I see another obligation that defeats the first one. Thus, 'only an obligation can beat an obligation' (Williams 1985, 180).

Williams' argument provides one invaluable suggestion for conceptualizing a non-idealized account of ethical reasons: move ethics/morality away from the terrain of moral obligation alone toward a view of *ethics* as a concern for how one should live. Political commitment will be a source of obligation in some cases. Far more importantly, it is an active component in shaping my ethical life in ways that

cannot be understood only through the idea of obligation. We are beginning to see how things start to go wrong when we disregard this fact, when we start with the grid of

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obligation that morality imposes and then attempt to fit within it the way our ethical reasons are shaped by the lives we want to live and the values we want our actions to stand for.

In fact, these broader choices always *can* be fit within this grid in some way or other,¹³ as we see in my earlier argument that ideal theories give moral value to the objects of political commitment. But in this process, most of what matters to agents is erased. Fitting these reasons within the obligation grid may make them unrecognizable to the person who has them.¹⁴ Even worse, the concrete ground for her actual reason will be lost. When we turn to political commitment, we see that the very source of those ethical pursuits—in a person's experience of oppression—is made irrelevant. Were it not for this experience, she would not pursue them nor would she know what specific shape her reasons should take. How, Mills might ask, could *these* be rendered irrelevant? To understand the normative priority we give to ethical reasons arising out of political commitment, we must go beyond the kind of justification that ideal theory ascribes to such reasons.

2.3.1 Normative Priority

We often give normative priority to reasons that arise out of political commitment. First, ends promoting political commitments can take precedence over other potential ends we might pursue. Second, they will be the subject of an ongoing reflection that has many direct and indirect effects on ethical reasoning and action. In this sense, political commitment is an ongoing project of developing and revising ends, and the choices we make out of these commitments bear on a myriad of other choices.

There are several explanations for the normative priority we give to these ethical reasons. First, we believe they are politically and ethically important. Some political aims may require priority if we are to see them realized and much may be at stake in accomplishing those aims.

A second reason is that political commitments are not just things we have, but things we live. To have them is to make them real in our lives. A political commitment creates self-imposed demands on us. The context of oppression often challenges our ability to satisfy these demands. On rare occasions, the simple failure to prioritize a commitment will put the commitment itself in jeopardy. For example, many social pressures will pull us away from living feminist

commitments: when sexism is all around us, the costs of resistance are high and resistance requires conscious effort.

A third reason to give political commitments priority is to explore their implications in our lives. We might want to see to what extent we can live out our political commitments, in the spirit of learning and experimentation. We may ask ourselves what kind of changes we can make in the way we live and how these might transform our desires, beliefs and political understanding.

In other words, reasons arising out of political commitment have priority in two senses: in the sense thought to be typical of ethical reasons, that we feel we must

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or should prioritize them (i.e., that it might be wrong not to), and in the sense that we care about them and want to realize them as part of our own self-imposed ideal for how we should live. The critical issue here is that these politically committed choices are ethical choices, made in light of our individual and collective evaluations of political contexts, our place within those contexts, and our understanding of what we should do from that place. The ability to act in ways consistent with our commitment even in the face of ongoing oppression can depend on the strength of our conviction that it is ethically necessary to do so. Many things will pull us away from this desire; such actions almost always have costs. A newly-minted law student with anti-racist commitments may not be able to pay off her student loans if she chooses to work in poverty law or for prisoners' rights. If a janitor stands up to her overbearing supervisor to defend the right of her pregnant fellow janitor to take a break, she may find that stance both frightening and difficult. This will be true for practical reasons—it could put her own job in jeopardy—and also for psychological reasons, because simply surviving in oppressive class, race and gender contexts requires actors to internalize norms of deference that are emotionally unsettling to violate.

Do people hold fast to such choices primarily because it satisfies their preferences? Not at all—these are clearly ethical choices. People are likely to see acting consistently with the commitment as right, and failure will produce moral emotions of remorse, shame or guilt.¹⁵ To recall the issue that Williams raises (and Mills echoes), ideal theory encourages us to read these as ethical choices only when they can also be justified by some overarching moral consideration, such as promoting general happiness or well-being, or treating others as ends of themselves. Of course, through such considerations, we can justify certain actions arising out of commitment. We can cite consequentialist reasons for doing poverty law or working for prisoners' rights rather than working in corporate law or for the district attorney. When I try to protect someone else from unjust authority, I could be said to stand up for both her dignity and my own. I do not

claim that these are empty considerations. Instead, they neither represent the reason I have nor are they always necessary in order for me to have such a reason. Further, without my politically committed belief that what I seek ultimately is to change the conditions under which people suffer poverty, unjust imprisonment, and inhumane working conditions, I would not have the reason to act as I do. The politically committed belief is therefore necessary for my reason.¹⁶

If our explanation depends on an ideal obligation, however, we may lose sight of what justifies our reason for prioritizing the committed choice over other alternatives, or for making the committed choice at all. The ideal justification for the action does not capture the sense of ethical necessity a person gives to her reason. It is not *her* justification.

Further, in some cases, if I give my commitment priority and believe that it gives rise to a compelling ethical reason to act, this would be unintelligible within ideal theory's conception of moral obligation. On this view, if I treat some of these reasons as ethically compelling, I appear to misunderstand moral requirements or I misunderstand what morality is about. When political commitment is part of my ethical

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conception of myself, however, it may seem to me that a failure to do something expressing that commitment is also an ethical failure. Many political commitments require us to refuse to collaborate with oppressive structures, whether or not such collaboration would directly bring about an evil or require us to perform immoral actions. Berta's refusal to work for World Bank funded projects is an example of this kind of refusal.

Nor can ideal theory make sense of reasons to perform political actions that are expressive rather than purposive. For example, within ideal theory, it is hard to make sense of actions that are prompted by concerns for political solidarity—the idea of standing with others in their oppression—as ethical actions, even when people make considerable sacrifices in the belief that these actions are morally right. Under some conditions, we could make a higher-order idealized moral justification for expressive moral actions, but it would be very tenuous. Many acts of solidarity do not (and are not intended to) promote good consequences. Nor are they, strictly speaking, acts of beneficence that help others realize their ends. Hunger strikes and civil disobedience do have strategic value at times, but some see them as a way to express solidarity with those who suffer from war or to refuse even symbolic collaboration or cooperation with militarist institutions.

If people have no other access to actions effecting change, they may not be primarily concerned about what the action brings about. Instead, their actions may

have symbolic value. In cases of great urgency or times when little can be achieved, a person may be unable to hope for more than being able to express her deepest commitments and to attempt to resist oppressive power in the only way she can.¹⁷ However, such expressive actions are never an obligation on any ideal account of moral justification. Nor are they supererogatory since they are too far outside of recognized duties to go ‘above duty.’ Further, if ethical justification must always take an idealized form, these actions may also be open to ethical criticism because the ethical space that they occupy leaves us less room to act on other, more ‘real’ obligations. And the costs we incur make us less able to act on the obligations we are supposed to have.¹⁸

2.3.2 Fungibility

It is true that within ideal theory, we may have special obligations, given our particular social roles, jobs, particular relationships (e.g., as a parent) and so forth. However, in the most basic moral sense, everyone has exactly the same *general* moral obligations. Ideal moral requirements ‘abstract away’ from the actual social positions of persons in one crucial way: individual relationships to structures of social, political and economic power are not thought to directly determine the ethical reasons we will have.¹⁹ At most, such circumstantial facts are relevant only because they determine our opportunities for moral action. Our ethical failures, if they occur, come from the failure to satisfy general moral obligations that apply equally to everyone. Two issues arise here. The first problem is that of moral fungibility: on

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ideal accounts of obligation, we can discharge our moral obligations in a variety of ways. If we are engaged in a project of moral worth, we do nothing wrong if we substitute that project for another one of equal moral worth. What then do we say of people who believe that it would amount to ethical failure to substitute non-political moral aims for politically committed moral aims?

This question of fungibility helps us understand the close relationship between political commitment and ethical agency. When a person fails to prioritize certain political commitments in circumstances that threaten them, she can see that failure as a profound ethical failure. An explanation for this belief lies both in the actual importance the person believes the commitment has, and in the fact that political commitments are central to her conception of herself as a moral agent.

It is not the case that political commitment has no ethical relevance within ideal theories, even if it is absent from the explicit discussion of moral action these theories provide. If ideal theories were to grant a role for ethical reasons arising out of

political commitment, what might this role be? Within ideal theory, political commitment itself does not give rise, on its own, to ethical reasons. Within consequentialist theory, however, it seems that political commitment could be desirable, depending on its content. And within Kantian theory, it is sometimes morally worthy or at least permissible. In consequentialist theory, political commitment could be an important source of moral motivation, one that would get a person to perform many actions that have good consequences. In indirect consequentialist theory, a person might believe that she is performing the action out of political commitment and not for its immediate consequences; that might be a good thing since awareness of the 'true' consequentialist justification could sap her motivation. Ultimately, however, it does not matter for our moral evaluation of her action whether or not she has the political commitment. The commitment itself may or may not have instrumental value.

In ideal theory, certain kinds of moral actions can have what might be called 'moral equivalency.' If I am supposed to perform an action A that has good consequence A₁, I can substitute B (an action with an equally good consequence B₁) for A, and it is a matter of moral indifference whether I perform A or B. I may be able to save lives by becoming an investment banker and donating money to poverty relief. From within the consequentialist perspective, this is no better or worse than engagement in a political movement to challenge the structures of class, race and gender that cause poverty. (It may in fact be worse to engage in the political action if it helps fewer people, but the question of moral equivalence is different from the question of demandingness, which I set aside here.)

Political actions sometimes benefit other people directly. In Kantian theory, many of these actions could be considered acts of beneficence. Oppression interferes with the ability of others to act on their ends, and it violates their dignity. In acting on my political commitments, I am acting in accord with wide or imperfect duties to promote the dignity of others and to treat them as ends in themselves. (I may not be acting *from* duty unless I am primarily motivated by reverence for the moral law.) I could satisfy imperfect duties of beneficence in many ways. Anti-racist work will promote the dignity of others but I would equally discharge my duty to help

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others with their ends by volunteering to coach the local soccer team or running errands for the neglected elderly at the local old-age home. If I do nothing wrong, I am permitted to prefer my politically committed goals (and they are morally worthy if I have the right kind of motivation for them). However, within Kantian theory, we cannot get a purchase on my belief that the pursuit of my politically committed goals may be far more important ethically than any other action I might perform.

Political commitment makes us unwilling to grant that I sacrifice nothing of ethical importance when I forego my political aim for another aim of equal moral value. The political nature of the commitment becomes very clear at this point. Substituting one moral value for another fails to satisfy my sense of what ethics requires of me here because my relationship to the political situation itself demands a response. A Chicana who works for justice in her own community may think it is simply wrong for her to do nothing while Mexican nationals die trying to cross the border between the United States and Mexico, and are rounded up into detention centers where they lack all political rights. For her, it is a moral mistake, and a kind of ethical inconsistency, if she overlooks the connection between her own community's struggles and the treatment of those struggling to cross the border. A white person may believe that she cannot in good conscience benefit from white privilege in a racist society without putting her effort into political action that opposes racism. To fail to act seems to endorse her own unjust privilege.

That is, political commitment makes us see that the present political situation demands something ethically of us *now*, something that we cannot discharge in other ethical ways. First, we do not believe there is a morally equivalent action if that action fails to engage with oppression we understand to have a particular connection to us, whether as victims or beneficiaries. Second, we may see the failure to address oppression as a profound ethical failure even if we utilize the opportunity to perform some ethically equivalent action. On ideal theory, Berta's commitment to the survival and autonomy of the Lenca might be praiseworthy. But she would do nothing wrong in acting on her deliberative latitude to choose other ethical aims and give up the struggle for Lenca survival. While I cannot speak for Berta, it is not at all hard to imagine that in the case of such dire oppression a person could perform a host of very praiseworthy actions and still believe she did the wrong thing in this case by failing to act on her political commitment to address oppression. The situation itself, and my interpretation of my place within it, may call on me to do something. Political commitment expands my moral responsibilities beyond the bounds of ideal moral obligation. Whatever else I do to help others or to make their lives better, I cannot rest easy within a regime that tortures people, for example, just because I also gave comfort to many neglected elderly in my neighborhood. This does not require me to have the absurd thought that the neglected elderly are in some way less morally valuable than those who are similarly oppressed as I or those who are victims of the regime in which I live. Rather, my place within a structure that oppresses people and my reflection upon that place gives me an urgent and pressing moral responsibility that goes beyond my moral obligation to consider the dignity or well-being of everyone around me.

2.4 Justification

The discussion of fungibility shows that our ethical choice to act on one reason rather than another is responsive to the circumstances of oppression and our social location relative to those circumstances. A further question is *why* we have the particular ethical reasons that we have in oppressive contexts. I pose this question for the moment not as a question about justification, nor about all ethical reasons, but about the origins of a particular type of politically committed reason. This is more than the question ‘why do you care?’ or ‘why does that matter to you?’ That question about motivation lies at the heart of questions about the source of certain reasons to pursue political goals. Many people do not care about oppression; we could ask them ‘why *don’t* you care?’ And many do care (at least to some extent) but do nothing. It is possible to contemplate and witness things we abhor and fail to act. It is also true that we can understand, and care about, the general moral consideration that oppression falls under in ideal theory without necessarily recognizing the wrong of oppression or acting upon it.²⁰ It is possible to know and care a great deal about dignity or the way suffering detracts from overall happiness and fail to notice many instances of oppression. And, if we wanted to understand why certain ethical agents, but not others, attend to oppression and try to address it, our best explanation will depend on their experience of oppression and their collective commitment to overcome it. That fact is relevant to the issues raised in this paper, even if it is not the basis for my argument.²¹

One interpretation of the claim that what I have a moral reason to do depends on my social location is not very controversial. In any moral theory, my actual reasons depend on what I have opportunity to do and thereby on my circumstances. Suppose there is a general universal reason to \square when moral consideration Q is present. If moral consideration Q is not present or I can do nothing then I don’t have an extant or concrete reason to \square . However, we can all still have a standing reason to \square when Q is present. If oppression is a moral wrong, everyone has a reason to \square to oppose it, but if they cannot, they have a reason to support or approve of others’ \square ing. In other words, we still have the same general ethical reasons even if those reasons play out differently in actual circumstances. Within ideal theory, my social location affects my circumstances in this way and can affect what I actually have reason to do. On this interpretation, however, social location itself does not play the role in justification that I have suggested it has. We can grant that an agent-neutral version exists for every moral reason that can apply to every person regardless of social location, and that social location will affect opportunities to act on this reason. However, on this view social location with respect to oppression still plays no critical role in justifying the kind of reasons we have.

It is questionable how much explanatory work the above account does in helping us to understand what we have reason to do. To understand reasons to address the wrong of oppression, it will not be sufficient. First, our social location with respect to oppression gives us actual ethical reasons to do things we would not have reasons to do from another social location. We can universalize such reasons, but this universalization will be too idealized to make sense of our reason in real terms, i.e.,

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in terms that make them reasons for action. Second, the full justification for our moral reason sometimes depends on beliefs based on evidence that lies in the experience of, and direct reflection upon, oppression. This doesn't deny that any moral reason can be described in an agent-neutral form, but it does deny that the level of abstraction described above tells us much about the ethical reasons people have in situations of oppression or why they have those reasons.

Take the example of acts of self-respect, or what might be called 'standing up' in conditions of oppression. In actions like these, agents resist and refuse to comply with the demeaning images or standards placed upon them within oppressive circumstances, sometimes by other individuals and sometimes more nebulously within the culture. Such actions can be public or private. Since they are acts that affirm the worth of the self, they are probably made better sense of within Kantian theory than within most forms of consequentialism.²² (They could contribute to good consequences when they are public, but here, the version of consequentialism one holds will matter a bit.) So, one example of standing up might be walking off the job when treated in a racially derogatory way or not conforming to standards of personal behavior or appearance that are demanded of one because of cultural standards that are subordinating. Simply refuting a subordinating idea or image by speaking out is another very common form of standing up, one that requires considerable courage for people with little social power. The ethical reason for these actions can be universalized in some way, such that we could have a prima facie reason that 'anyone who is demeaned by oppressive actions or images within the culture should act in ways to signal their refusal to grant credence to such actions or images.'

But of course, not everyone *is* demeaned in contexts of oppression. On the contrary, members of the dominant group may have politically committed ethical reasons to avoid demeaning others. If we generalize this to the point where (a) oppression as its own social category drops out, and (b) an agent's specific relationship to oppression drops out, then we lose the very point of standing up as an act of resistance. It is true that 'everyone has an ethical reason to resist being demeaned by others' or even more generally 'everyone has an ethical reason to

resist acts that demean,' but the action only makes sense within its political context and from a particular social location. The only reason the situation is demeaning is because I am oppressed, i.e., because of my social location. Moreover, you can't be, unless you share that location. Here, social location *just is* necessary to understand our ethical reasons. It is not merely the thing that gives me the *opportunity* to act, it is the very grounds *for* my action.

There is something very compelling about the idea that others have my reason to effect a political change to overcome my or others' oppression. The idea of an agent-neutral reason makes this possible.²³ Persuasion plays a role in political activism and moral transformation and it may seem that the goal of persuading others is to get them to share my ethical reasons. Those who oppose just political projects do so mistakenly. If they want to be ethical, then they have to correct injustice and oppose oppression. But how do I get others to share my reason? While it is absurd to think that Paul Wolfowitz, who headed the World Bank while the project was initiated, really did share Berta Cáceres' reason to stop the El Tigre dam, it is arguable that

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he should have shared it. Wolfowitz's own interests and ideology probably got in the way of his seeing that he has a reason, or his motivation to act on it. However, we could perhaps still rely on moral recalcitrance as our primary explanation rather than needing to assume his reasons would be transformed by an understanding of the oppressive nature of the dam and his relationship to that oppression.

Even from the standpoint of the ideal sympathetic observer, a myriad of rational considerations tell against the idea that the El Tigre dam ultimately promotes good consequences. Hydroelectric dams quickly become obsolete. The El Tigre dam is a \$1.5 billion project in one of the world's poorest nations, and uncountable suffering could be relieved by spending that money elsewhere. The dam will displace 20,000 people. Even the dam's specific impact on the Lenca people has moral relevance from an ideal standpoint. Their displacement will destroy a culture they have maintained during 500 years of repression. It may not seem that we need to persuade someone like Paul Wolfowitz of more than the truth of consequentialism to persuade him he has a reason to work against the building of the El Tigre dam.

To really make sense of how oppression affects the ethical reasons we have, however, we must consider whether Paul Wolfowitz can share the actual ethical reasons of someone like Berta Cáceres who is 'organizing to defend Lenca territory' to ensure that her people survive.²⁴ Since this is the basis of the ethical

reason to organize against the dam, we must consider whether a general justification for the undeniable ethical good of preserving a whole people from destruction captures the reasons of those who are inside this struggle, i.e., the reasons arising from the Lenca's experience of oppression. Can the reasons be shared by someone who does not have the experience to understand how such circumstances are oppressive? Do our own relationships to oppressive structures provide us with particular reasons that others do not share?

In considering the understanding of political circumstances that reflection upon socially located experiences open up for us, we encounter issues of both 'theoretical knowledge' and practical knowledge—knowing how, rather than knowing that. Even for the oppressed themselves, it takes effort to understand the complex effects that oppressive structures have on people. Here again, a highly general form of what we have reason to do, as well as a very general justification of that reason, is useless without specific knowledge of oppressive circumstances. Oppression causes suffering and interferes with our well-being. It undermines our dignity and makes it impossible for us to act on our ends.²⁵

Yet, what, exactly, are we to do about oppression? An oppressed person is not like someone drowning in a river who only needs saving, or someone in the hospital who needs to be visited.²⁶ Reflection upon socially located experiences can be necessary to recognize the wrongs of oppression but even more so to arrive at reasons concerning them.²⁷ What reasons do we have when we recognize these wrongs? To answer this requires experience that makes possible reflection upon the actual circumstances of oppression. Since reason requires action, it makes little sense to say that we have reason to \square when moral consideration Q is present unless it is also possible for us to know what \square ing means with respect to moral consideration Q. If we understand Q through the notion of dignity, what specific reasons do we have to

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act when oppression undermines dignity? Everyone has a general reason to rectify oppression but coming to *actually* have such ethical reasons in the first place usually results from embracing a political commitment that directs our responsibility toward the oppressed person in that situation. And in the absence of the reflection that political commitment makes possible, it will be very unlikely we will know what to do.

Political commitment—particularly in its collective form—is perhaps the most important way that people work together to develop the knowledge they require in order to determine where their ethical responsibilities lie and what actions would best meet those responsibilities. Berta does complex epistemological work as she

shows privileged citizens of the United States and Canada what World Bank projects like hydroelectric dams do to the oppressed people they affect. Her experience gives her knowledge of the way both local and global conditions impact the Lenca. That knowledge is indispensable to any meaningful ethical assessment of the Lenca's situation. Such epistemic work must first occur before anything can be done, before there can be any reason to \square at all. This is not to say that she cannot convince outsiders of many of these facts. These facts about oppression are not necessarily inaccessible to others, even if knowledge of them must be mediated through the interpretations of those who directly experience them.²⁸ Nevertheless, the ethical reasons they engender in others who do not share her conditions necessarily have to account for their *different* relationship to oppressive structures.

2.5 Conclusion

I do not deny that we have universal ethical reasons to oppose oppression or contend that the moral considerations raised within ideal theory are empty. However, I have showed here that we may lose something crucial as we translate some ethical reasons arising out of political commitment into universal reasons for every agent. That is, we cannot universalize every concrete or actual reason to oppose oppressive circumstances. One worry that might be raised is that, if some of these ethical reasons to oppose oppression depend upon a commitment we have adopted and our reflection on our social location in light of that commitment, this amounts to a denial of general or universal reasons to oppose oppression. The argument here does not deny the existence of universal reasons to oppose oppression or reasons to pursue the ethical goals of politically committed agents. Instead, it argues that such general reasons do not, on their own, generate or justify all the ethical reasons that arise out of an agent's political commitment.

Thus, the argument may be compatible with some forms of particularism.²⁹ Mills (172) cautions us:

There are many dangers in particularism, whether individual or group-based.

Theory necessarily requires abstraction, and to concede this realm to the adversary is an odd way of challenging him.

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One concern here has to do with the status of non-idealist work as theory. Yet another is that we won't be able to make a critique of oppressive circumstances that is wide enough or broad enough to appeal to the oppressed and oppressors alike. Rejecting universalism 'risks the dangers of relativism, which makes it difficult to affirm that, objectively, women and people of color are indeed

oppressed—not merely that they believe they’re oppressed.’ In addition, he says, ‘the mainstream apparatus (e.g., of justice and rights) then becomes a necessarily alien tool in the oppressor’s arsenal, rather than a weapon to be used and turned against him’ (172).

The argument I have given suggests that this worry is misplaced even if some particularist elements may show that universal obligation cannot take us as far as we need to go to understand ethical reasons arising out of oppression. Being suspicious about the claim that there is a universal version of all of our ethical reasons need not lead us to reject universalism in every form whatsoever. For example, nothing I have argued denies that certain kinds of lives are better for people than others, or that an ethical life will be one in which we strive to create conditions where people can lead better lives. Nor is it nonsensical to appeal to general ethical considerations like dignity. On the contrary, such appeals will be much more convincing when they are grounded in concrete ethical claims arising out of people’s actual experience of oppressive circumstances.

We cannot arrive at the knowledge we need to act and hence at ethical reasons that are actual reasons for action without a reference to concrete experience. Political commitment makes it possible for us to use experiences of oppression to develop new understandings of ethical possibilities. Moreover, political action itself disseminates knowledge. Berta has a goal in working with United States and Canadian citizens, with other indigenous rights groups and with local groups: to be rationally persuasive to others—to teach them what she knows about the history of Lenca oppression and the structures that must be abolished to overcome that oppression. Those in certain social locations will make the ‘discoveries’ necessary to give us the tools to dismantle the structures that oppress us.³⁰ Political commitment, which can be entered into from (and experienced differently through) many different social locations, is in part a commitment to attend to, and be ethically transformed by, the knowledge that such discoveries make possible.

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Notes

1. Although political pressure by COPINH and other groups did delay it, construction on the dam began in June of 2006. In Spanish, COPINH is Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras.
2. Berta has received credible death threats. Two Lenca activists, Fabian Gonzalez and Santos Carillo, were assassinated in 2003.

3. There are many versions of consequentialism and many interpretations of Kantian theory, but because my arguments are about the structure of these theories, I do not go into extensive detail about how each version would differently handle the cases I describe. Moreover, I do not deny that some versions of these positions could target oppression directly. Because consequentialism is so flexible in its content, for example, a version of consequentialism could focus on oppression as an undesirable consequence and liberation from oppression as a consequentialist goal. Moreover, the Kantian idea that persons are of equal moral worth, and that human dignity is of critical moral concern, is far from morally irrelevant in situations of oppression. What I contend is that this underdetermines agents' reasons to such an extent that we cannot get an explanation for why someone has a reason to act in particular cases of oppression. For that, we need an account of how reflections on her relationship to oppression and choices arising from that reflection shape her ethical reasons. These views—by virtue of the way they are structured—cannot give us such an account.
4. For example, Anna Politkovskaya (2007), who was assassinated for her journalistic work exposing human rights abuses in the war in Chechnya, disavowed an explicitly political goal for her work. As she says in her book *Putin's Russia*, 'I am not a political analyst. I am just one human being among many, a face in the crowd of Moscow, Chechnya, St. Petersburg and Russia.' (12). While it makes sense to see her response to the horrors she saw in Chechnya as an ethical response, her work shows that making sense of those horrors did require her to confront the political power structure in Russia. I do not claim that the political and the ethical are easily disentangled but only that we fail to understand someone like Politkovskaya's commitment to journalistic truth and the sacrifice she made for it if we fail to recognize how it was prompted by the political context she found herself in and her sense of responsibility within that context.
5. Neither consequentialism nor deontology can explain or fully justify the actual reasons that result from political commitment. However, an account available to ideal theory will also recommend attention to some of the problems caused by oppression. Of course, not every reason stemming from political commitment is justifiable on deontological or consequentialist grounds. Clearly some conflicts arise between deontological restrictions, for example, and what someone thinks politically necessary to overcome oppressive circumstances. Someone might think that some forms of deception are justified in the pursuit of political goals—to protect a political action from police disruption, for example. Even if such actions are impermissible on deontological grounds, however, the point is that the overarching political commitment and its ethical purpose will not be incompatible with valuing others as ends in themselves. What is missing when political commitment is absent is a connection between a moral commitment to value others as ends in themselves and the actual political project and its ethical reasons. People with the right kind of political commitment do respect others, attend to dignity, and so forth, but these concerns alone do not explain their actual reasons, nor do they fully justify what those reasons are reasons to do.
6. The claim is not that these accounts of oppression involve a correct analysis of oppression. Nor does it mean that they necessarily offer the correct account of what makes oppression wrong. It is simply that—at the very least—the effects of oppression on people are morally relevant from the perspective of any ethical theory. The fact that some theories overlook oppression or subsume it under a much more general wrong still means that

aspects of oppression—and what must be done to address them—will not be targeted. For example, the specifically political aspects of the harm done by oppression will not be well understood if our focus is primarily upon someone’s ability to realize the ends she already has or upon satisfaction of her preferences or other consequentially-based goals. Oppression deeply compromises the ends and preferences we have.

7. I do not argue here for the claim that all of our ethical reasons operate in the way that politically committed reasons do. However, a view that seems promising for explaining the ways that political structures impact ethical reasoning is that of Margaret Urban Walker who argues that we should ‘locate morality in *practices of responsibility* that implement commonly shared

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understandings about who gets to do what to whom and who is supposed to do what for whom’ (2007, 16). In particular, Walker’s view explains why politically committed agents prioritize ethical reasons arising out of political commitment in a way that goes beyond any universal obligation they might be said to have. If ‘morality itself is a disposition of powers through an arrangement of responsibilities’ (2005, 106) then the decision of moral agents like Berta to take up highly specific and demanding responsibilities would be explicable by the ways in which she has been assigned responsibility, and embraced it, because of her membership in the Lenca community. The fact that I might regard it as a great moral failing to ignore oppression within my sphere even if I act on morally equivalent projects can also be explained by the fact that this involves shunning a responsibility I believe I have. However, the argument that political commitments engender ethical reasons may not require that all our ethical reasons arise out of an arrangement of responsibilities.

This does not entail their having a wholly rational basis. Autumn Jackson, quoted in www.laborresearch.or/story2.php/42, accessed 3/10/07. Note that these concerns are both general—i.e., what mothers should do for their children—and highly specific, since her circumstances require her to stand up in a situation of oppression that will not be generalizable to other mothers who do not experience oppression. It is the situation she finds herself in that gives her a moral reason to act and, as I will argue below, she thinks she must act. This suggests she would be reluctant to regard her action as either supererogatory or fungible with other morally equivalent actions. One issue is whether there are more general ethical requirements arising out of social location that aren’t tied to political commitment. For example, is there a requirement on those who benefit from a system of oppression to resist that system? I don’t take up this more general question. The discussion here concerns voluntarily assumed political commitments and the way they shape ethical reasons rather than more general ethical requirements arising out of social location. However, those who take up political commitments may believe that it is not merely optional to act on some of the ethical reasons stemming from that commitment. For

example, in discussing Kant's view of practical necessity Williams (1985, 191) says that 'the agent's conclusions will not usually be solitary or unsupported, because they are part of an ethical life that is to an important degree shared with others. In this respect, the morality system itself, with its emphasis on the "purely moral" and personal sentiments of guilt and self-reproach, actually conceals the dimension in which ethical life lies outside the individual.' Of course, some obligations are ongoing, such as the obligation to utilize one's talents, and other obligations to develop one's moral character. But these still focus on determining particular choices in particular situations. Note Mills' discussion of whether one can simply apply ideal theory to the problems that would arise in nonideal theory, such as the problem of racism (176). The analogous point there would be that certain effects of racism are, for example, incompatible with Rawls' principles of justice. However, e.g., having positions and offices open to all would not eliminate racism. (Nor would the difference principle or the principle of equal liberty do so.) That is, Rawls' account is radically incomplete when it comes to race and cannot be just mechanically applied to deal with the problem of racism. If liberal theories of this kind were to address racism, they would have to actually talk about race and racism. (And this will require nonideal theorizing.) A (question-begging) temptation there is to say that what matters about racism when it comes to justice is only what can be understood through the parameters of liberal theory as it stands. Similarly problematic is the claim that the moral content of politically committed reasons can only be what the morality system says it is. See Michael Stocker (1976). The similarity between Stocker's argument and the case here is that the justification for the ethical reason that is available through ideal theory is not the agent's justification. What results may not be quite the schizophrenia Stocker describes. However, what is most ethically relevant in the situation—the existence of oppression—has a tangential and second-hand relevance. Further, the priority the person gives to her reason

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may also appear unjustifiable on moral grounds because she believes the situation demands something more or something different than the ideal justification would.

15. Right and wrong are not necessarily idealized notions. They can depend on obligations that arise out of commitment and context rather than universal covering obligations.
16. Ethical situations are highly complex matters. Political commitments will usually be accompanied by a complex of other ethical concerns such as compassion for those who suffer, indignation about violations of dignity, and many other morally relevant considerations. A naturalist and non-idealist account of ethical reasons does not require a single sufficient justification for such a reason. Therefore, I do not contend that political commitment is a sufficient reason in such a situation; rather, I allow that a variety of moral considerations may play a role and these considerations always interact with political commitments in the cases at issue here.
17. Consequentialists might argue that such actions inspire others to perform political actions with greater utility, and so they do have good consequences after all. But this only pushes the question back. If they produce no political gains themselves, why would they inspire others? They are inspiring as political and ethical statements, i.e., statements of commitment. What others attend to is the very fact that they express commitment, and if people did not see the moral value in the expression itself, the actions would not be

- inspiring.
18. This may be one concern expressed in Williams' integrity argument. However, I take it that more than integrity is at stake in actions that express solidarity with others. While the attempt to disavow connection with evil structures and to refuse to be an agent of injustice oneself may be tied to integrity, the focus on connection with others and the commitments they share with oneself can be grounded in a concern for those others as well as an expression of shared ethical and political identity. See Williams and Smart (1973).
 19. See Mills, 166.
 20. See Mills, 174–180. 'If it were obvious that women were equal moral persons, meant to be fully included in the variable "men," then why was it not obvious to virtually every male political philosopher and ethicist up to a few decades ago?' (Mills, 176.)
 21. Mills mentions one central explanation of this fact: 'that people's social location may both blind them to important realities and give them a vested interest in maintaining things as they are. . . .' (Mills, 180)
 22. A person has a narrow duty to avoid servility on the Kantian view but it seems unfair to regard a failure to stand up as an act of servility, since the primary moral wrong is caused by oppressive agents or institutions rather than by oneself. It would be an undue burden on us to require us to actively combat each and every instance of oppression or risk being called servile. Internal refusal to take on the demeaning idea or imagery also counts. (In fact, people find very complex ways to resist oppression, both psychologically and socially, when speaking out is life-threatening.)
 23. Thomas Nagel (1979, 90–91) first introduced the idea of agent-neutrality. Here, I do not engage with the large debate as to whether all reasons for action have an agent-neutral form. See Christine Korsgaard (1996, 133–134).
 24. 'Heirs of Lempira Struggle for the Land,' www.globalexchange.org/countries/americas/honduras/4299.html. Accessed December 15, 2007.
 25. Here again, we might need to consider what ends people would have if they were not oppressed.
 26. Of course, another issue is that many of the moral wrongs that ideal theory purports to address are tied up in structures of oppression. Thus, the most effective ethical actions will require some relationship and engagement with oppression itself. The neglected elderly in my earlier example experience marginalization, for example. See Iris Young (1990, 53–56).
 27. See Satya Mohanty's (2000, 39–40) argument that 'objectivity is inextricably tied to social and historical conditions, and objective knowledge is not the product of disinterested theoretical inquiry so much as a particular kind of social practice. In the case of social phenomena such as sexism and racism, whose distorted representation benefits the powerful and

established groups and institutions, an attempt at an objective explanation is necessarily continuous with oppositional political struggles.’

28. See Henze (2000, 245–249).
29. For example, the view that political commitments generate ethical reasons for one person that are not ethical reasons for everyone is compatible with a rejection of what Urban Walker (2005, 11) calls strict universalism which ‘forbids grounds of judgments and consequent affirmings of moral positions which are not compelling for all alike.’ However, it does not deny that some moral claims are universally binding on all individuals or that there are no true moral principles. For a view that rejects moral principles as adequate descriptions of moral situations to which our ethical reasons must respond see Dancy (1993, 2004).
30. According to Mohanty’s realist theory of cultural identity, ‘social struggles of dominated groups, for instance, can help produce more objective knowledge about a world that is constitutively defined by relations of domination. That would help explain why granting the possibility of epistemic privilege to the oppressed might be more than a sentimental gesture; in many cases in fact it is the only way to push us toward greater social objectivity’ (2000, 58).

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