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The Moral Obligation to Resist Complacency about One's Own Oppression

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Abstract: While philosophers have highlighted important reasons to resist one's own oppression, they tend to overlook the phenomenon of complacency about one's own oppression. This paper addresses this gap by arguing that some oppressed agents are obligated to resist complacency about their own oppression because failing to do so would significantly harm themselves and others. Complacent members of oppressed groups fail to resist meaningfully, are self-satisfied, and are epistemically culpable. I contend that focusing on the obligation to combat complacency is useful for at least two reasons. First, complacency about one's own oppression is a distinctive phenomenon that warrants separate philosophical attention. Second, focusing on the obligation to resist complacency helps analyze an undertheorized group of oppressed agents by challenging the binary understanding of power prevalent in the literature on the duty to resist, thereby sharpening philosophical accounts of resistance and filling a gap in a prominent well-being-based theory of resistance.

Complacency about oppression impedes our ability to remedy long-standing social injustices.

Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, denounced complacent white moderates, arguing that “history will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people” (2005: 341).

While theorists (King 2005; McKenzie 2015; Blankschaen and Zhu 2020) have outlined how allies of oppressed agents can lapse into complacency and how vigilant allies can resist it, non-oppressed agents are not the only ones susceptible to complacency about oppression. This paper

explores the phenomenon of complacency about one's own oppression and argues that some oppressed agents have an obligation to resist their own complacency.

Imagine a woman named Luna who used to live in a relatively conservative town. As a lesbian, she experienced firsthand explicit discrimination and wanted to do something to combat homophobia. She wrote articles on gay rights, helped run a local LGBTQ center, and vlogged about her experience as a middle-class white lesbian. After moving to a liberal city for a new job, Luna still attends a pride parade annually and adds a rainbow filter to her Facebook profile picture, but she no longer performs any other actions to resist homophobia despite having more resources now. As progressive as the city where she lives is, Luna still regularly experiences homophobic microaggressions, but she manages to ignore them. She pats herself on the back for her current level of resistance, believing she has done her part to combat homophobia. While she feels sorry for the LGBTQ youth she sees on the news who have been forced into homelessness, she does not think her privilege has anything to do with their predicament.

Like Luna, many oppressed people are complacent. Caitlyn Jenner, a high-profile trans woman, said during a 2015 BuzzFeed interview that “the hardest part of being a woman is figuring out what to wear.” Audre Lorde urged black women to combat their own complacency: “[I]n these days ahead, as we examine ourselves and each other, our works, our fears, our differences, our sisterhood and survivals, I urge you to tackle what is most difficult for us all, self-scrutiny of our complacencies, the idea that since each of us believes she is on the side of right, she need not examine her position” (1986: 7). A more recent case is found in a 2019 piece published in *The Atlantic* by James Kirchick, a gay journalist, entitled “The Struggle for Gay Rights Is Over,” in which Kirchick claims that “[f]rom a legal standpoint, the movement has achieved nearly everything it needs for gay people to prosper as equal citizens.” At risk of stating

the obvious, it is hasty to characterize LGBTQ people as having achieved equality when the Pulse and Colorado Springs shootings are still within recent memory. While things have changed considerably since 2019, people still confront legalized discrimination based on their sexual orientation in most U.S. states, from employment to housing, healthcare, and child adoption.

Given these threats, can Luna's attendance at pride parades and changing her Facebook filter constitute meaningful resistance to homophobia? My answer is no: she is complacent. But what does it mean to be complacent? Should we hold her accountable for her complacency? Before asking whether there is a moral obligation to resist complacency about one's oppression, we need to first consider whether there is a moral obligation to resist one's own oppression, for the former duty presupposes the latter. Recently, many philosophers have theorized about whether there is a duty to resist one's own oppression (Vasanthakumar 2020). Proponents of the duty to resist offer self-regarding (Hill 1973; Boxill 2010; Hay 2011, 2013; Silvermint 2013, 2017; Khader 2021) and other-regarding (Cudd 2006; Harvey 2010; Vasanthakumar 2018; Terlazzo 2020) reasons to support their arguments. These accounts highlight important reasons to combat oppression, but they overlook the phenomenon of complacency.

While the obligation to combat complacency about one's oppression follows from the obligation to resist oppression, I argue that focusing on the former duty in its own right is useful for at least two reasons. First, complacency about one's own oppression is a distinctive phenomenon that deserves separate philosophical attention, as inadequate resistance alone does not render one complacent. The other two indispensable features of oppressed persons who are complacent (henceforth "complacent oppressed agents") are self-satisfaction and epistemic culpability. We should think of complacent oppressed agents as manifesting these three features that reinforce one another.

Second, focusing on the obligation to resist complacency also helps us analyze an undertheorized group of oppressed agents, and thus either identifies a gap within or extends prominent accounts of resistance. Philosophers defending the duty to resist one's own oppression tend to take a binary approach to power. They largely differentiate oppressor groups and oppressed groups in a dichotomous manner. Although almost all of them acknowledge heterogeneity within oppressed groups, this is mentioned only to absolve the oppressed of the duty to resist under certain conditions. While it is useful to separate the obligations of subordinate persons from those of dominant persons, it is not always possible to do so, as some agents belong to both groups simultaneously. Complacent oppressed agents, as I elaborate below, are these agents (henceforth "privileged oppressed agents")—they are oppressed along some axes of their social identities and privileged along some other axes. Theorizing about complacency under oppression enables us to capture our moral world in a more sophisticated way.

In this paper, I argue that privileged oppressed agents are obligated to resist complacency about their own oppression. In section one, building on three general features of complacency, I offer a conceptual analysis of complacency about one's own oppression according to which members of oppressed groups exhibit the aforementioned three individually necessary and jointly sufficient features. In section two, I argue that complacent oppressed agents are (*prima facie*) obligated to combat their complacency because failing to do so would inflict or allow *significant* harm to both themselves and their fellow oppressed group members. In section three, I examine prominent accounts of resistance and illuminate the ways in which the duty to combat complacency affects how we theorize about the duty to resist oppression. I also investigate how the duty to overcome complacency sharpens contemporary accounts of resistance and fills a gap

within a prominent well-being-based theory of resistance. I conclude by considering objections in section four.

Before I proceed, two caveats are in order. First, my conclusion that there is an obligation to combat complacency is based on my assumption that there is an obligation to resist one's own oppression. While this assumption has recently been challenged by some philosophers (Hirji 2021; Widdows 2022), my goal is not to examine whether there is such a duty, but to explore how to best theorize about this duty. Second, I adopt Marilyn Frye's conception of oppression. According to Frye, oppression is a system of interrelated barriers and forces that benefits individuals in dominant groups at the expense of those in subordinate ones (1983: 5). Homophobia, sexism, racism, ableism, and imperialism are all manifestations of oppression because they systematically subordinate certain groups of individuals and limit their life options while benefiting others. Not all cases of oppression are life-and-death situations. There are many conditions under which oppressed agents can do something to combat injustices.

1. Complacency about One's Own Oppression

What exactly does it mean for a person to be complacent? Despite its ubiquity, complacency has not received much philosophical attention (Unwin 1985; Kawall 2006; Doan 2014; see also Crisp and Cowton 1994; Smith 2004; Szabados and Soifer 2004; Blankschaen and Zhu 2020). The few philosophical accounts of complacency only sketch some general features of complacency, mostly in the context of environmental activism, without addressing complacency about one's own oppression. In this section, I fill this gap by advancing my account of complacency about one's own oppression. To do so, I first extrapolate three general features of complacency from the literature.

1.1 Three General Features of Complacency

(a) Insufficient action

The first feature of complacency is insufficient action on a project to which one is committed. Insufficient action ranges from absolute inaction to insignificant action relative to what is required. Absolute inaction takes two forms. A complacent person may either take no action on the project in question or take action that does not contribute to its realization. Unlike absolute inaction, insignificant action has some instrumental value (e.g., raising awareness). However, like absolute inaction, it is not sufficient to fully realize one's project. Michael Doan (2014) discusses an insignificant action against climate change. According to Doan, climate change should be understood as a collective problem rather than a problem caused by each individual in isolation. Given the systemic nature of climate change, the only way to achieve meaningful, substantive change is through collective action. Individuals who are complacent about climate change may exhibit "settled expectations of self-sufficiency" (Doan: 644). Such people act as if they can combat climate change by solely changing their own behavior and lifestyles when they know they should instead engage in collective action against climate change.¹ Since individual resistance (e.g., recycling) alone is ineffective when it comes to climate change, complacent people's resistance is far from sufficient. Resisting complacency, for Doan, requires people to find and act on alternatives to the individualistic model of combating climate change.

(b) Inappropriate attitudes toward oneself

Another feature of complacency concerns two inappropriate attitudes complacent people may have about their own behavior. One of them is excessive self-satisfaction. As Jason Kawall argues, complacent individuals' self-contentment is excessive if "[they] feel greater self-

¹ Doan does not believe epistemic culpability is a primary feature of complacency.

satisfaction than is warranted by [their] accomplishments” (2006: 345). Consider Kawall’s example of an extremely wealthy man who believes he should do something to significantly reduce the damage caused by a natural disaster to the survivors. Despite this belief, he donates only a negligible amount of money and is content with his decision. His satisfaction about his accomplishment is excessive because it is not justified by his small amount of beneficence. Contentment with imperfect situations, as Cheshire Calhoun (2018) suggests, can be a virtue, but that becomes a symptom of complacency when self-satisfaction is not in proportion to the condition.

The second inappropriate attitude typical of complacency is people’s unwillingness to subject their beliefs to analytical scrutiny. Nicholas Unwin claims that complacent individuals are complacent because they are unwilling to acknowledge the fallibility of their moral beliefs (1985: 205). We can find a case of this aversion to scrutinizing one’s own moral standards in Kawall (2006). Asked to reflect on his environmental impact, an individual recognizes that he is not an “environmental saint” but still holds that his modest contribution guarantees his being “a good environmental citizen.” Kawall sees this person as complacent because he refuses to recognize that what he has done is insufficient for being a good environmental citizen, and that he should have done more given his privileged position.

(c) Epistemic culpability for misestimating one’s accomplishments with respect to a project

Complacent people also mistakenly estimate what they have done to promote a project in an epistemically culpable manner. They are blameworthy for either irresponsibly overestimating how well they live up to the demands of the projects to which they are committed, or for grossly underestimating how exacting their projects are. These people are epistemically culpable because they could and should have known better.

A complacent person may hold adequate beliefs about the demands of a project but “overestimate in an epistemically culpable manner how well one’s actions satisfy these demands” (Kawall: 347). Recall Kawall’s example of beneficence: although the affluent man rightly believes he cannot evade the responsibility to significantly ameliorate the survivors’ predicament, he falsely assumes that donating a negligible amount is enough to considerably alleviate their suffering. Given that he has access to information about what constitutes genuine help, and that his immense wealth enables him to help meaningfully, he culpably overestimates how well his donation matches his commitment to supporting survivors.

Misestimation of one’s accomplishments may also manifest itself in underestimating the demands of one’s projects. Underestimation takes two forms. First, complacent persons may underestimate the amount of work required by their projects. Second, complacent persons may underestimate the kind of work their projects require. If the wealthy person, instead of donating money, only prays for the survivors, then he misconstrues the kind of work that is required because praying would not necessarily improve the situation, and because he is able to help in a more constructive way.

1.2 Complacency about One’s Own Oppression

Complacency about one’s own oppression has three essential features: (a) meaningless resistance to one’s own oppression, (b) self-satisfaction, and (c) epistemic culpability. Oppressed agents are complacent if and only if they exhibit all three features.

Before delving into each feature of complacency, it is important to note a temporal component. Colloquially, the term “complacent” is used in two ways: (1) as a description of someone who starts off as complacent and (2) as a description of someone who lapses into complacency. Some oppressed agents never take any meaningful action to resist their oppression.

While we could also characterize them as complacent, my account focuses on the moral status of agents who, for various reasons, stop engaging in meaningful resistance and do not see that as a moral failure—persons who become complacent.

I should also note that complacent oppressed agents are in a relatively more privileged position than other members of their oppressed groups. My account is inherently intersectional in that I consider how multiple marginalized identities intersect with one another to systematically place one in an inferior position, rather than looking at each oppressive axis of one's identities in isolation (see Crenshaw 1989). Recall Luna. Being white gives Luna privileges that lesbians who are women of color do not have. Being employed also places her in a much better financial position than unemployed white lesbians. Complacent agents like Luna are oppressed and privileged simultaneously. My account, therefore, goes beyond a binary understanding of power to focus on the power dynamics among oppressed agents. Let me now turn to the three features of complacency that privileged oppressed agents like Luna would exemplify.

(a) Meaningless resistance

Complacent oppressed agents resist their own oppression meaninglessly when they fail to carry out effective acts of resistance that are commensurate with their privileged position. While many complacency theorists like Kawall treat meaningful action and sufficient action as synonyms, meaningful resistance should not be equated with sufficient resistance partly because individual resistance (i.e., my focus in this paper) alone can fight but not completely eliminate oppression, making it inherently insufficient. Collective resistance is also required. Resistance can still be meaningful without being sufficient.² Meaningless resistance manifests itself in two aspects of complacency: quantitative and qualitative complacency. If the oppressed are

² Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this.

quantitatively complacent, then they engage in meaningful resistance less frequently. Luna becomes quantitatively complacent after moving to a liberal city because she resists homophobia only *once* a year by attending an annual pride parade and adding a profile filter. If the oppressed are qualitatively complacent, then their resistance lacks meaningful action.³ Luna is also qualitatively complacent because meaningful resistance to homophobia relies on actions that go far beyond attending an annual pride parade and adding a profile filter.

(b) Self-satisfaction

The lack of meaningful resistance is motivated by self-satisfaction. Oppressed agents who become complacent are self-satisfied with their failing to continue carrying out genuine resistance. Self-satisfaction includes the belief that one has done one's job. Luna is self-satisfied with her current meaningless resistance. She feels and believes she is doing enough.

(c) Epistemic culpability

Complacent oppressed agents are epistemically accountable for complacency in two ways. For one, they know what meaningful resistance is, but they irresponsibly convince themselves of the false belief that they have done their part.⁴ Second, they also irresponsibly fail to reflect on their privileged position. Complacent oppressed agents may deny or convince themselves to ignore the fact that they gain concrete benefits from the oppression of other more disadvantaged members of their oppressed groups. In short, the oppressed who become complacent should have known better about the efficacy of their resistance and the role they play in consolidating oppression.

³ Meaningful resistance takes many forms and is context dependent. For a detailed account of meaningful resistance, see Fakhoury (2019).

⁴ I take meaningful resistance to be self-aware.

All three aforementioned features should be present to mark one as complacent. Lacking one or more would result in cases where oppressed agents fail to resist their own oppression meaningfully but are not complacent. Oppressed individuals may be spending their energy combatting forms of oppression that seem to them more harmful and therefore not resisting their own in a meaningful way. They may simply get older, develop coping mechanisms, and leave behind meaningful forms of resistance of their youth. They may also submit to (Garcia 2021) or be complicit in (Knowles 2021) their own oppression. These oppressed agents are not complacent because it is not clear they are self-satisfied or epistemically culpable.

A detailed account of how the oppressed become complacent is beyond the scope of this paper. One possible explanation is laziness on the part of these oppressed agents. It could also be that some complacent oppressed agents are too arrogant and entitled to reflect honestly on their current level of resistance and their privileged position. It is unsurprising that some oppressed persons may lapse into complacency if they believe their actions are helping those who are more disadvantaged rather than resisting systemic injustices that harm both themselves and others.

2. The Moral Obligation to Resist Complacency

I have introduced three general features of complacency. The question now becomes what complacent oppressed agents should do about their complacency; particularly, whether they are obligated to resist it. To answer this question, I will first ask whether there is a general duty to resist oppression and what grounds that duty. Theorists of oppression have recently taken up these questions and successfully established the *prima facie* obligation to resist one's own oppression. In this section, I contend that there is *also* an obligation to resist complacency about

one's own oppression. For not doing so would significantly harm both oneself and others, or allow significant harm to continue.⁵

Before proposing my argument for the duty to resist complacency, let me first consider how power functions *within* liberation movements since it is these power dynamics that give us reasons to hold complacent oppressed agents accountable for this obligation. Consider Kimberlé Crenshaw's basement analogy. Crenshaw invites us to see oppressed agents as being in a basement. Intersectional oppression positions those who are only oppressed on the basis of one aspect of their identities on the shoulders of those who are multiply oppressed. Given the singularity of their oppression, those on top are usually the ones who can escape the basement. Most anti-oppressive movements have been focused on supporting those who are singularly burdened, ignoring the needs of those at the bottom of the basement. This lopsided focus has made it almost impossible for those who are multiply burdened to escape unless they become members of the top groups. As Crenshaw writes, "those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that 'but for' the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room" (1989: 151).

The power differences among oppressed agents prompt feminist scholars and critical race theorists to investigate the nature of privilege (e.g., He-Yin 1907/2013; Du Bois 1935/2007; Lorde 1984; McIntosh 1989; Collins 1993; Bailey 1998; Gordon 2004; Sullivan 2006; Applebaum 2008; Monahan 2014; Manne 2020).⁶ One prevalently identified feature of privilege is unearned benefits. Peggy McIntosh, for example, compares white privilege to an invisible knapsack that contains "unearned assets which [one] can count on cashing in each day, but about

⁵ Like Cudd (2006), I do not use "harm" to mean direct, physical harm.

⁶ Many of them do not use the term "intersectionality" when discussing privilege, but the ideas are similar. He-Yin's theory goes beyond intersectionality. For an overview of her theory, see Zhu (2024).

which [one] was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (10). While white people’s lives are portrayed as morally neutral, their privileges entail “conferred dominance” over non-whites (McIntosh: 12). More generally, those who bear a single burden are privileged relative to those who are multiply burdened because being closer to the exit of the basement of oppression is an unearned advantage bestowed upon them systematically at the expense of those at the bottom.

Privileged oppressed agents are obligated to resist complacency about their own oppression because failing to do so would significantly harm both themselves and others, or allow significant harm to continue. Their privileged position allows their complacency to cause these harms. Imagine a white woman, Maggie, who works as a lawyer with a group of sexist colleagues in a male-dominated law firm. As an Ivy League graduate, Maggie used to believe her privilege entailed responsibility. She used to call out sexist comments and behaviors whenever she encountered them and pushed for policy reforms within the firm. After a year of working in the same firm, she thinks she has done her part combating its sexist culture. She now only occasionally shares posts about gender equality in the workplace, ignoring the fact that she continues to benefit from elitism and white supremacy.

Even though complacent Maggie still speaks out on social media, it is unlikely that her sexist colleagues and boss will take her action as resistance to sexism. Maggie’s colleagues may take her meaningless resistance as a case of her calming down. They may think she did not know the “conventions” of their workplace. Further, they may not see her preceding callouts as genuine attempts to combat sexism either. If resistance is not perceived as resistance, then Maggie’s colleagues may, e.g., continue to make sexist jokes and question Maggie’s abilities.

Though Maggie is oppressed along some axes of her identity, she is privileged along others. While she may not directly cause the oppression of women of color lawyers in her firm,

as a white woman, she is privileged with respect to them. Once sexist and racist norms in the workplace are further solidified, those at the bottom will face greater challenges. For example, women of color employees may have fewer promotion opportunities than their white peers even if they are equally qualified. Maggie's privilege certainly does not render her immune from sexism, but it does give her more resources and power to resist meaningfully. If privileged oppressed agents do not make an effort to combat complacency, then they, like Maggie, not only consolidate their own oppression, allowing and potentially inflicting significant harm on themselves, but also worsen the already precarious status quo of those who are less privileged.

These harms to complacent oppressed agents themselves and to others reinforce one another. Complacent oppressed agents will continue to be harmed unless everyone is free from oppression. As Audre Lorde powerfully declared, "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own" (1981: 10). By overcoming complacency, privileged oppressed agents can make progress in combating oppression for those at the bottom of the basement, thereby challenging the system that harms themselves as well.

3. Accommodating the Obligation to Resist Complacency

It is tempting to think that discussing the obligation to resist complacency is unnecessary because it follows from the more general duty to resist oppression. I agree that the former follows from the latter, but this does not mean that focusing on the former is unnecessary. It is noteworthy that Silvermint's (2013) well-being-based theory of resistance fails to account for the duty to combat complacency. In this section, I demonstrate the need to focus on the duty to combat complacency by investigating how this obligation sharpens prominent accounts of resistance and fills a gap within Silvermint's theory.

3.1 Self-regarding Reasons for Resisting Oppression

In the literature, there are three main self-regarding grounds for resisting oppression: well-being, autonomy, and epistemic transformation. Unlike other self-regarding accounts of resistance, well-being-based theories are at odds with the duty to combat complacency. Consider a prominent well-being-based account of resistance. The harm to oppressed people’s well-being motivates Silvermint’s (2013) argument for the duty to resist one’s own oppression. He holds that resistance is obligatory because resistance both protects and promotes oppressed people’s objective well-being under oppressive conditions. Silvermint intends “well-being” to include having a high-level of autonomy, satisfying overall life prospects, and one’s pursuit of valuable aims (2013: 417). He highlights “objective” well-being because oppression, for him, does not modify what constitutes genuine well-being. If resistance prevents oppressed people’s autonomy or overall life prospects from collapsing, then resistance protects their well-being. If resistance facilitates their pursuit of valuable aims—“those goods, projects, relationships, and states of being that are important to the individual, as well as the general aim of leading a morally worthwhile life”—then resistance promotes their well-being (Silvermint 2013: 412, 417).⁷

Silvermint also asserts that it is morally permissible for oppressed agents to prioritize their own well-being over that of others because their lives are already constrained (2013: 414). While he would agree that complacent oppressed agents like Luna do harm other less privileged oppressed individuals, he would not hold them accountable for resisting complacency about their own oppression. Indeed, he would be unlikely to characterize them as complacent about their own oppression in the first place because he views the obligation to “help [their] fellow victims” as a separate duty from the obligation to resist their own oppression (2017: 38).

⁷ Silvermint holds that the obligation to resist does not automatically follow from the obligation to promote one’s own well-being. Presumably, he thinks that well-being is intrinsically valuable for everyone, and that oppressed people’s well-being is burdened, so they are obligated to resist their own oppression.

Silvermint's theory conflicts with the duty to combat complacency because it overlooks the aforementioned concern that well-being is a good for which oppressed persons need to compete. The well-being of privileged oppressed agents is advanced at the expense of the well-being of those who are more disadvantaged. Privileged oppressed agents risk lapsing into complacency if the reason for resisting oppression is to promote their own well-being. Privileged oppressed persons, in their attempts to improve their own well-being by resisting their own oppression, may harm those who are more disadvantaged, thereby reinforcing oppressive structures that simultaneously undermine their own well-being. Combatting complacency may undermine privileged oppressed agents' well-being because that requires them to engage in proportionate resistance, which almost always carries costs. In short, well-being-based theories like Silvermint's are incompatible with the duty to resist complacency about one's own oppression.

This incompatibility has two closely related implications. For one, it entails the need to introduce complacency to our theorization of resistance because the duty to resist complacency, for Silvermint, does not naturally follow from the duty to combat oppression. Second, it implies a binary understanding of power that is prevalent in the literature on the duty to resist oppression. All oppressed agents are subsumed under a single category on Silvermint's account. He does not attend to the power dynamics within this larger group, much less the special obligations of privileged oppressed agents. His theory, thus, renders it acceptable for privileged oppressed persons to benefit from the oppression of others who are more disadvantaged without doing anything about the status quo.

In contrast to well-being-based accounts, autonomy-based theories of resistance have the potential to account for the duty to overcome complacency so long as they take the self to be

socially embedded. These theorists hold that failing to resist one's own oppression harms oppressed agents' rational capacities. Thomas Hill (1973) and Bernard Boxill (2010) were among the first to denounce compliance with oppression for the reason that compliance signals servility rather than self-respect. Adopting a Kantian approach, Carol Hay (2011, 2013) goes further to argue that the oppressed are obligated to resist because oppression endangers their rational nature, and because people are obligated to protect their rational capacities. Kant claimed that "a rational [being] exists as an end in itself" and, based on this claim, proposed a formulation of the Categorical Imperative: "so act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (2012: 4:429). That is, rational beings should *always* respect all rational humans' autonomy by treating them as ends in themselves rather than using them as *mere* means to achieve their own goals.

Hay asserts that the obligation to resist one's own oppression is what Kant called an "imperfect duty" (2011: 28-30). This is an imperfect duty because the oppressed are not obligated to resist oppression at all times, or at any cost, or in any specific way. Although this imperfect duty does not require any specific action, it does require people to set the goal of resisting their own oppression. If oppressed agents acquiesce in their own oppression and refuse to do anything to ameliorate their predicament, then they violate this imperfect duty. Like other imperfect duties, the obligation to resist one's own oppression permits two latitudes. First, the "latitude in which action to take" includes different actions that the oppressed could choose to perform to resist their oppression. Second, the "latitude in refraining from action" leaves room for the oppressed to not resist every instance of their own oppression (Hay 2011: 30). As long as

people do not comply with their oppression, refraining from resistance occasionally would not necessarily undermine their rational capacities.

There is a Kantian-inspired argument that can be given for the obligation to resist complacency. As aforementioned, complacent oppressed agents are self-satisfied with their inadequate resistance and are epistemically culpable for failing to recognize their privilege and the requirements of meaningful resistance. Now, suppose that they are deceiving themselves into believing they have fulfilled the duty. Since self-deceit is a special kind of mendacity, these complacent oppressed agents would be violating what Kant called a perfect duty—the duty that no rational person can avoid under any circumstances—not to lie (2012: 389, 402-403, 422, 429-430).⁸⁹ They would be violating a perfect duty to respect and protect their own rational capacities.¹⁰ By lying to themselves, they would not be adequately respecting their own rational autonomy or allowing themselves to make informed, rational decisions that reflect their autonomy. To protect their rational capacities, they would have to honestly reflect on their current level of resistance and recognize their privileged position. That is, they must resist complacency.

To successfully accommodate the duty to combat complacency, autonomy-based theorists like Hay need to make sure the sense of self on their accounts is socially embedded. The concept of the “socially embedded self” is similar to relational autonomy (for an overview, see Oshana 2020). Socially embedded selves are selves formed by social relationships. Once we see our selves as socially embedded, we stop seeing everyone as separate, unrelated persons living in

⁸ While Kant did not discuss self-deception per se, his claim is applicable to this special case of lying.

⁹ I assume that lying to oneself about the efficacy of one’s resistance and the role one plays in consolidating oppression must always be resisted. While people, in many cases, do not know they are self-deceiving, complacent oppressed agents oftentimes are aware. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for reinforcing this.

¹⁰ I take complacent oppressed agents to be rational beings. Agency may be severely compromised under the most oppressive conditions, but these are not the cases I am thinking of.

isolation and instead focus on how we are interconnected. The socially embedded self captures reality more faithfully in that it explains how we become who we are under oppressive conditions. Theorists like Hay should modify their accounts to adopt a socially embedded self because this model enables them to analyze the role that social relations play in forming and perpetuating oppressive structures. Only by honestly reflecting on their social position and current level of resistance can oppressed agents make informed, rational decisions that reflect their autonomy and avoid succumbing to complacency.

Disagreeing with accounts of resistance that view noncompliance with oppressive norms as a requirement of self-respect, Serene Khader (2021) argues that a self-regarding duty of the oppressed is better understood as cultivating an alternative, anti-oppressive understanding of the self and society. She finds those accounts unsatisfying because they “are complicit in victim-blaming and prescribing action that gets in the way of ending oppression, as well as overspecifying the self-regarding duties of the oppressed” (238). Oppressed agents experience countless “double binds,” situations in which they are worse off regardless of what they do (Frye: 7). The ubiquity of double binds prompts Khader to contend that noncompliance almost always comes with costs, and that oppressed persons often consider compliance their best option (233-236). She proposes an account of self-regarding duty that does not expect oppressed individuals not to comply with derogatory norms. The alternative is to cultivate what she calls “a counterhegemonic normative perspective,” from which oppressed persons see themselves as equal to others and oppressive social structures as impeding them from reaching such equality (238).

Khader’s account of resistance has the potential to accommodate the duty to overcome complacency because it highlights the importance of developing an accurate understanding of

one's own social position and the structural nature of oppression. To successfully resist complacency, oppressed persons need to reflect on their privileged position and current level of resistance. A counterhegemonic normative perspective would allow complacent oppressed agents to see themselves as benefiting from the subordination of other members of oppressed groups and recognize that it is morally troubling not to use their privilege to facilitate structural change. While short-term compliance may be acceptable under certain conditions, that is not always what complacent oppressed agents should do. Introducing the duty to combat complacency would consolidate Khader's account in the sense that it holds *all* privileged oppressed agents responsible for *always* carrying out proportionate resistance to oppression.

3.2 Other-regarding Reasons for Resisting Oppression

Other-regarding accounts of resistance can accommodate the obligation to resist complacency. The literature provides two main other-regarding reasons for resisting one's own oppression, one of which is norm-based. Ann Cudd (2006) proposes a prominent norm-based theory of resistance. Cudd argues that not fulfilling the obligation to resist one's own oppression harms other oppressed agents because it reinforces oppressive norms. This other-regarding harm manifests itself in cases of "oppression by choice," where people have to choose between resisting and participating in oppression (2006: 200). Because resistance exposes oppressed agents to danger, people risk harming themselves if they resist. Although compliance protects them from these risks, it can perpetuate the oppression of others with similar oppressed identities. For example, Cudd claims that a woman's decision to become a stay-at-home mother can reinforce a gendered division of labor (1994). Cudd urges the oppressed to weigh the consequences of their actions and opt for the one that generates "the least undeserved harm" (2006: 199). If it is costless to resist by not perpetuating oppressive norms, then it follows that

one is obligated to resist one's own oppression. Cudd also acknowledges that the obligation to resist one's own oppression is absolvable when resistance is overly costly (2006: 198).

We can give a related other-regarding argument for the obligation to resist complacency. Complacency reinforces oppressive stereotypes, which consolidate oppression and render resistance more challenging. Recall Maggie. Her complacency risks reinforcing the oppressive norm that women are not intelligent enough to engage in technical conversations. If this norm is solidified, Maggie and other women in the firm who are less privileged may experience greater difficulty when attempting to change the nature of workplace conversations.

Another reason why Cudd's account can adequately accommodate the duty to combat complacency is because of its unwitting focus on privileged oppressed agents. To demonstrate the coerciveness of oppression by choice cases, Cudd uses an example in which an imagined couple, Lisa and Larry, jointly decide that Lisa should become a stay-at-home mother to maximize the benefits of their family. They have agreed that it is in the best interest of their family for one of them to stay at home to take care of the children, and recognized that housework is not inherently a woman's job. Because of the gender wage gap, Lisa earns less than Larry. To reach the best outcome for the family, Lisa decides to stay at home. Cudd argues that Lisa's decision is coerced because she lacks appropriate opportunities to which she is entitled (1994: 24-28). This argument has been criticized for overgeneralizing the experiences of oppressed persons. Rosa Terlazzo suggests that Lisa is privileged because she can opt out of work to care for her family, but this option is not available to working-class women (2020: 401).

Despite criticism, the unique and presumably unwitting focus of Cudd's account renders it particularly well-suited to accommodate the obligation to resist complacency in oppressed agents who are privileged relative to other oppressed agents. But insofar as Cudd's account treats

all oppressed agents as a single group, and insofar as Lisa is used to represent all women, her account would not require Lisa to reflect on her privilege. To fully account for the duty to resist complacency, her theory would need to urge privileged oppressed agents to reflect on their social positions and actively engage in resistance. Introducing the duty to combat complacency would reshape Cudd's theory of resistance to focus more explicitly on the power dynamics within oppressed groups.

Another set of other-regarding arguments for the duty to resist oppression is grounded in the unique epistemic position of oppressed persons. Standpoint theorists argue that knowledge derives from people's lived experiences (e.g., Harding 1993, 2004). Oppressed agents are said to have an epistemic advantage over oppressors because they have privileged access to knowledge about what it is like to be in a subordinate position and how to navigate an unjust world as members of inferior groups. Because only oppressed persons have access to this knowledge, their participation in resistance is necessary, which further entails that they have a duty to combat oppression (Vasanthakumar 2018).

While some oppressed agents are unable to resist their own oppression due to a lack of resources, if standpoint theorists are correct, complacent oppressed agents are well-positioned to resist. Their relatively privileged position provides them with the epistemic resources and material conditions necessary to resist. I acknowledge that these epistemic resources may be misused: a privileged oppressed person may use an oppressive stereotype to manipulate the oppressor into doing what she wants. There are, however, cases in which epistemic resources can be used to resist rather than comply with oppression. If Maggie uses her own experience of sexism in the workplace to push for anti-discrimination policies in her firm, then her knowledge

of how to navigate an unjust world could be a powerful tool in the fight for a healthier working environment.

In this section, I have explicated why the duty to resist complacency is not reducible to the duty to resist one's own oppression. Introducing the duty to resist complacency enables us to zero in on privileged oppressed agents, which further allows us to identify some weaknesses of leading theories of resistance. Well-being-based accounts fall short because resisting complacency is incompatible with promoting the well-being of privileged oppressed agents. While other theories of resistance are not at odds with combating complacency, they need to take the power dynamics within oppressed groups seriously to adequately accommodate the duty to combat complacency.

4. Objections

In this final section of the paper, I respond to three objections. The “overburdensome objection” charges that the duty to combat complacency is overly taxing for oppressed persons. The “victim-blaming objection” asserts that holding oppressed agents responsible for resisting complacency unfairly imposes a heavy burden on individuals who are already victims of oppression. Finally, the “collective action objection” questions whether individual resistance to complacency is effective.

4.1 The Overburdensome Objection

Some might object that resisting complacency is supererogatory because an obligation to resist this moral failing is overly onerous for the oppressed. While the duty to resist complacency might seem taxing at first, it is not *overly* costly. I do not deny that resistance almost always carries costs (Fakhoury 2021; Hirji 2021; Khader 2021). But meaningful resistance, I argue, is never about maximizing resistance in all ways and at all times. It instead requires only that

complacent oppressed agents engage in effective forms of resistance that are *in proportion to* their privileged positions. I do not assume that complacent oppressed people always have to prioritize combating oppression over other goods, but their privilege gives them the resources and ability to resist more effectively.

There are meaningful forms of resistance that are both effective and not overly costly. Consider mentorship. Mentorship takes many forms: checking in on students, writing a strong letter of recommendation, and lending an ear when needed all count as mentorship. While mentorship has costs (e.g., time-consuming), it also has benefits, and its benefits may well outweigh its costs. For example, some senior faculty who are women of color choose to mentor graduate students who are women of color partly because they would not be where they are today without the support they received early in their careers. They want to “pay it forward” by mentoring the next generation of scholars from marginalized groups, hoping that their predominantly male and white profession will become more inclusive in the future. But, arguably, achieving that end is not necessary for the benefits of mentorship to outweigh its costs, if mentorship itself can bring them joy. What I want to emphasize is that we should not only recognize the costs of resistance but also appreciate its benefits.

The view that resistance is almost always overly burdensome also has a troubling assumption, which is that resistance must be public. Meaningful resistance does not have to be visible to others, nor does it have to be perceived as such by third parties (Fakhoury 2021). Meaningful resistance may even seem like compliance to some. Take Khader’s (2021) example of Shreya.¹¹ Shreya, a lawyer who is a woman of color, rolls her eyes when assigned office

¹¹ This is a fictitious case based on data about the challenges faced by women in career advancement (William and Dempsey 2014). Khader uses it to illustrate the possibility of resistance under conditions of oppression. Francesca Cesarano (2024) refers to Shreya’s resistance as “prospective resistance.”

“housework” tasks. She performs some of the tasks to avoid professional penalties for violating gender norms. However, she occasionally apologizes for “forgetting” to, for instance, buy office presents. While Khader does not explicitly identify Shreya as a privileged oppressed agent, it is not implausible that she is, as she can opt out of certain tasks.

To elaborate, Shreya may be perceived as complying with oppressive gender norms when she makes coffee for her colleagues, but she may also be resisting meaningfully in ways that are not necessarily visible to everyone. Another lawyer who is a woman of color may notice her eye-rolling and realize that she has not really forgotten anything. Shreya may also remind herself that she deserves better treatment through acts of resistance that are in proportion to her privileged position. With this mindset, she may engage in other forms of resistance that are potentially more impactful and public as she moves up the corporate ladder. Non-public resistance can be morally risky as it may turn into complacency. Shreya, therefore, should do what she can to protect herself from lapsing into complacency while moving up the corporate ladder.

4.2 The Victim-blaming Objection

Another objection is that holding oppressed persons accountable for resisting their own oppression risks blaming them for creating their own plight. While my account does find complacent oppressed persons blameworthy, I would like to emphasize what to do with that blame. Iris Marion Young suggests that we think of the responsibility of oppressed agents as a forward-looking concept, meaning that they have work to do (2011). Young insists that blaming people for not performing their duties is not productive because that makes them focus on shifting the blame to their accusers, and avoiding accountability in the future. Martha Nussbaum takes issue with Young’s approach, arguing that individuals have very little reason to change without accountability (2009). I think Nussbaum is right that if we do not hold complacent

oppressed agents accountable, then there are worries that they will not change, and the harm caused by their complacency will not be addressed. But acknowledging that they are blameworthy may ultimately be less important than addressing what they are going to do to change. Here, Young's points about forward-looking responsibility are relevant. The suggestion is that we may need to combine backward-looking accountability with forward-looking change.

4.3 The Collective Action Objection

It is also tempting to think that holding individual privileged agents responsible for combating complacency is futile given the structural nature of oppression. Frye uses the bird cage analogy to illustrate why oppression is systemic. If we only look at one wire of a bird cage, then it may be difficult to understand why the bird is trapped. But we can see why the bird is immobilized if we look at the whole cage (Frye 1983: 4-7). Because oppression is systemic, one may assume that for any resistance to be effective, it must be collective and often must occur at an institutional level.

I agree that collective resistance is necessary to undermine oppression, but it does not follow that individual resistance is futile. The efficacy of resistance is less dependent on whether it is collective or individual; its efficacy instead rests on whether resistance challenges systems of oppression. If an act of collective resistance does not tackle structural injustices, then it is meaningless. The privileged position of complacent oppressed agents enables them to push for structural changes. A senior woman employee, for example, could use her status and position to encourage revising hiring goals and objectives, and emphasize the need to consider diversity and inclusion in the hiring process. I note that one of Robin Zheng's (2018) critiques of Young's (2011) Social Connections Model of responsibility is that it does not specify the contribution of individual resistance to structural change. To improve on Young's account, Zheng proposes a

new responsibility model—the Role-Ideal Model, arguing that everyone is individually responsible for structural injustices “through and in virtue of our social roles...because roles are the site where structure meets agency” (870).

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that complacent oppressed agents are obligated to resist complacency about their own oppression because failing to do so would inflict or allow *significant* harm to both themselves and fellow oppressed persons. Building on three general features of complacency, I identified meaningless resistance to one’s own oppression, self-satisfaction, and epistemic culpability as three necessary and sufficient features of complacency about one’s own oppression. I also examined prominent accounts of resistance and clarified the ways in which the duty to combat complacency affects the way we theorize about the duty to resist oppression. More work needs to be done to explore what *exactly* we should do to resist complacency.¹²

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