

The Moral Obligation of the Privileged to Resist Complacency about Their Own Oppression

Abstract: While many 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 considering whether there is a moral obligation of privileged oppressed agents to resist complacency with respect to their own oppression. On my account, complacent members of oppressed groups exhibit the following three individually necessary and jointly sufficient features: they take meaningless actions of resistance; they are self-satisfied; and they are epistemically culpable. I refer to these individuals as the "complacent oppressed." I contend that the privileged oppressed are obligated to resist complacency with respect to their own oppression because failing to do so would inflict or allow significant harm to both themselves and others. While the obligation to resist complacency follows from the obligation to resist one's own oppression, I argue that focusing on the obligation to combat complacency in its own right is useful for at least two reasons. First, complacency is a distinctive phenomenon that deserves separate philosophical attention because inaction alone doesn't render one complacent. Second, focusing on the obligation to resist complacency also challenges the prevalent binary understanding of power to help us analyze an undertheorized group of oppressed agents, and thus sharpens many contemporary accounts of resistance and fills a gap within a prominent well-being-based theory of resistance.

Complacency about the oppression of *others* is a common phenomenon in the context of social movements that aim to remedy long-standing social injustices. Martin Luther King, Jr. (2017), for example, complained about complacent white moderates in the Civil Rights Movement, noting "[h]istory 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." The kind of worry King raises is still relevant today. Although he, along with others (McKenzie 2017; Blankschaen and Zhu 2020), focus on how allies to the oppressed are complacent, I zero in on how oppressed agents themselves are complacent about their own oppression.

Imagine a woman named Luna who used to live in a relatively conservative suburban town. As lesbian, she experienced explicit discrimination firsthand 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 living in suburban America. After moving to Boston for a new job, Luna still attends the annual gay pride parade and adds a rainbow filter to her Facebook profile picture, but she no longer performs any other action to resist homophobia despite having more resources now. As progressive as Boston is, Luna still experiences homophobic microaggressions day in and day out, but she has developed a tough skin to ignore those more subtle forms of oppression. 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 LGBTQ youth who were forced into homelessness when seeing them in the news, she doesn't think her privilege has anything to do with their predicament.

Just like Luna, many oppressed people are complacent. Caitlyn Jenner, a high-profile trans woman, said during a 2015 BuzzFeed interview, “the hardest part of being a woman is figuring out what to wear.” Audre Lorde urged Black women to combat 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” (1985). A more recent case is found in a piece (2019) 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's hasty to characterize the lives of homosexual people as flourishing when the Pulse and Colorado Springs shootings are still within recent memory. From employment to housing, to healthcare, and to child adoption, people still confront legalized discrimination based on their sexual orientation in most states in the U.S.

Given the aforementioned threats, can Luna's attendance at the annual pride parade and her changing of Facebook filter constitute meaningful resistance to homophobia? The answer is no: she is complacent. But what does it mean to be complacent? Can we hold her accountable for her complacency? Before asking whether there is a moral obligation to resist complacency, 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, a significant number of philosophers have shed light on the debate on victims' duty to resist.¹ Proponents of such a duty 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 resist complacency follows from the obligation to resist oppression, I will demonstrate that focusing on the obligation to combat complacency in its own right is useful for at least two reasons. First, complacency is a distinctive phenomenon that deserves separate philosophical attention: inaction alone doesn't render one complacent. The other two indispensable features of the complacent oppressed are self-satisfaction and epistemic culpability. We should think of a complacent agent as manifesting three features that reinforce each other, rather than three separate and unrelated features.

Second, focusing on the obligation to resist complacency also helps us analyze an undertheorized group of oppressed agents, and thus either extends or identifies a gap within prominent accounts of resistance. Existing literature on the duty to resist tends to have a binary understanding of power. Theorists often differentiate oppressor groups and oppressed groups in a

¹ For a summary of the philosophical debate on victims's duties to resist their oppression, see Vasanthakumar (2020).

dichotomous manner. While it's useful to separate the obligation of the subordinated from that of the dominant, it's crucial to pay attention to the moral complexities of those who belong to both groups. Because the complacent oppressed, as I will elaborate below, are more socially privileged compared to other members of their oppressed group, theorizing complacency enables us to capture our moral world in a more nuanced way. For example, Daniel Silvermint's well-being-based theory of resistance cannot accommodate the moral complexities of those who are both victims on the basis of some aspects of their identity and perpetrators in virtue of others. He submits that privileged oppressed agents have no duty to resist their own oppression even when they are clearly complacent (2013). Introducing complacency to philosophical discussions of oppression, therefore, not only allows us to hold privileged individuals accountable for their problematic behavior, but also sheds light on what kind of approach is needed when theorizing about the duty to resist.

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 as such, 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 the complacent oppressed 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 demonstrate the ways in which the duty to combat complacency affects how we theorize about the duty to resist. I also investigate how the duty to overcome complacency sharpens contemporary accounts of resistance and identifies a gap within

well-being-based theory of resistance. I conclude by considering the overburdensome objection, the victim-blaming objection, and the collective action objection in section four.

Before I proceed, two caveats are in order. First, I assume that there is an obligation to resist one's own oppression. 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 the dominant groups at the expense of those in the 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 advantaging 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 hasn't received much philosophical attention.² Moreover, the few philosophical accounts of complacency only sketch some general features of it without saying anything about oppression. In this section, I fill this gap by advancing my account of complacency with respect to one's own oppression. To do so, I first extrapolate three general features of complacency as a moral failing from what has been published:

1.1 Three General Features of Complacency

(a) Insufficient action

The first feature of complacency is insufficient action regarding a project to which one is committed. Insufficient action ranges from absolute inaction to relatively trivial action compared to what is needed. Absolute inaction takes two forms: a complacent person might either not carry

² See Doan (2014), Kawall (2006), and Unwin (1985). For work that touches on complacency, see Crisp and Cowton (1994), Szabados and Soifer (2004), and Smith (2004).

out any action whatsoever regarding the relevant project or engage in some action that does not help realize the project. Unlike absolute inaction, relatively trivial action has some instrumental value. Nonetheless, akin to absolute inaction, it is inadequate to fully realize one's project.

Michael Doan (2014) discusses an example of relatively trivial action in the context of fighting climate change. According to Doan, climate change should be understood as a collective issue, rather than a problem that is caused by each individual in isolation. Given the systematic structures of climate change, the only way to bring about meaningful, material change is collective action. Being complacent about climate change, thus, can involve individuals whose behavior indicates, as Doan puts it, "settled expectations of self-sufficiency" (644). Such people act as if they can fight climate change by solely improving their own behavior and lifestyle when they do in fact know they should instead participate in collective action to fight climate change.³ Since individual resistance, such as recycling, alone is not effective when it comes to climate change, complacent people's resistance is, in Doan's view, far from sufficient. Resisting complacency, therefore, requires one to create and act on alternatives to the individualistic model of fighting climate change.

(b) Inappropriate attitudes toward oneself

Another feature of complacency concerns two inappropriate attitudes complacent people may typically have about their own behavior. One of them is excessive self-satisfaction. As Jason Kawall (2006) argues, complacent individuals' self-contentment is undue if "[they] feel greater self-satisfaction than is warranted by [their] accomplishments" (345). Consider an example offered by Kawall. An extremely rich person believes he should do something to significantly reduce the harm done to survivors of a natural disaster. Despite this belief, he

³ Doan doesn't believe epistemic culpability is a primary feature of complacency.

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 it becomes a symptom of complacency when self-satisfaction is not in proportion to the condition.

The second inappropriate attitude typical of complacency is an unwillingness to subject one's beliefs to analytical scrutiny. Nicholas Unwin claims that complacent individuals are complacent because they are reluctant to admit the fallibility of their moral beliefs (1985, 205). One case of this kind of aversion to inspecting one's own moral standards can be found in Kawall's article. Asked to reflect on his impacts upon the environment, an individual recognizes that he is not "an environmental saint" but still holds that the miniscule contribution he has done guarantees his being "a good environmental citizen." Kawall believes this person is complacent given his refusal to acknowledge that what he has done is not a sufficient condition 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 epistemically culpable 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. Such people are epistemically culpable because they could and should have known better.

A complacent person, as Kawall points out, 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" (347). Recall his example of beneficence: although the affluent person 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 the information of what constitutes genuine help is accessible and that his immense wealth enables him to help in a meaningful way, he culpably overestimates how well his donation matches his commitment to supporting survivors of a natural disaster.

Misestimation of one's accomplishments may also take the form of underestimating how demanding one's project is. There are two manifestations of underestimation. First, a complacent person may underestimate the degree of work required by one's project. If the same wealthy person believes one is merely expected to donate a small amount to the survivors, then he misconstrues the demands of beneficence (Kawall, 347). Second, a complacent person may underestimate the kind of work their project requires. If the wealthy person, instead of donating money, only prays for the survivors, then he misconstrues the kind of work that is needed because praying would not necessarily ameliorate the status quo and he is able to help in a more constructive way.

1.2 Complacency about One's Own Oppression

Complacency regarding one's own oppression has three essential features: (a) meaningless resistance to one's own oppression, (b) self-satisfaction, and (c) epistemic culpability. The oppressed count as the *complacent* oppressed if and only if they exhibit all three features.⁴

Before delving into each feature of complacency, it is important to note a temporal component of this moral failing. 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

⁴ My account draws largely on Kawall's, and thus is subject to similar critiques. I will respond to the main elements of the critiques below.

lapses into complacency. There are members of oppressed groups who never take any meaningful action to resist their oppression. While we could also describe them as being complacent, my account focuses on the moral status of the phenomenon where the oppressed, for various reasons, no longer *continue* to engage in meaningful resistance and do not see it as a moral failing. I focus on those who become complacent because they are more philosophically complicated than those who start off as complacent. The latter can be straightforwardly identified once we have a clear conception of the former.

I should also highlight that the complacent oppressed, on my account, are the ones in a relatively more privileged position compared to other members of an oppressed group. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) elaborates that people with multiple marginalized identities are at an oppressive "crossroads." She compares different identity-based injustices (e.g., sexism and racism) to roads, policies and social practices to traffic, and the law to ambulance (2016). If an individual stands at the intersection of these roads and gets hit by a car, it doesn't make sense to call an ambulance from each road to save her. Similarly, if an oppressed agent with multiple marginalized identities experiences injustice, we need to see how all the relevant factors intersect with each other to systematically put one in an inferior position, rather than looking separately at each individual oppressive aspect of one's identity, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. Crenshaw specifically talks about Black women's oppression, arguing that Black women's gender is racialized, and their race is gendered. They face gender and race discrimination together as a Black woman (1989, 148-160).

My account is inherently intersectional insofar as the complacent oppressed are more socially privileged compared to other members of their oppressed groups. Being white gives Luna the privilege that many of her fellow women of color lesbians do not have. The fact that

she has a job in Boston also places her in a much better financial position than other white lesbians who are homeless or job insecure. Complacent agents like Luna are oppressed and privileged at the same time. 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 those oppressed people like Luna would exemplify.

(a) Meaningless resistance

The complacent oppressed engage in meaningless resistance to their own oppression when they fail to carry out effective acts of resistance that are in proportion to their privileged position. While many complacency theorists like Kawall treat meaningful action and sufficient action as synonyms, meaningful resistance shouldn't be equated with sufficient resistance partly because individual action (i.e., my focus in this paper) alone can fight but not entirely remove oppression. Collective resistance is also needed. Meaningless resistance is evident in two aspects of complacency: quantitative and qualitative. If the oppressed are quantitatively complacent, then their resistance appears less frequently than meaningful resistance. Luna is quantitatively complacent after moving to Boston because she only resists homophobia *once* a year by attending the annual gay pride parade and adding a rainbow filter to her Facebook profile picture. If the oppressed are qualitatively complacent, then their resistance is different in kind from meaningful resistance.⁵ Luna is also qualitatively complacent given that meaningful resistance to homophobia depends upon actions far beyond attending an annual pride parade and adding a picture filter.

(b) Self-satisfaction

⁵ Meaningful or effective resistance takes many forms and is context dependent. For a detailed account of meaningful or effective resistance, see Fakhoury (2019).

The lack of meaningful resistance is motivated by self-satisfaction. The oppressed who become complacent are self-satisfied with their failing to continue carrying out genuine resistance. To be self-satisfied is to think of oneself as having done one's job. Luna is self-satisfied with her present meaningless resistance. Given her previous resistance, Luna seems to believe practices like helping run a local LGBT center and calling out homophobic behavior are necessary to resist homophobia. Because continuing the same level of resistance is not overly costly to Luna, she should at least maintain the same level of resistance to avoid complacency as long as homophobia still exists.

(c) Epistemic culpability

Self-satisfaction both hinders the complacent oppressed from being epistemically responsible for their meaningless resistance and results from their epistemic irresponsibility. They are epistemically accountable for complacency in two senses. For one, they know what meaningful resistance is, but they irresponsibly convince themselves into the false belief that they have done their part.⁶ Second, the complacent oppressed also irresponsibly fail to reflect on their privileged position compared to those who share some aspects of their identity but are relatively disadvantaged in virtue of others. Their inferior position and their lack of resources render it impossible for them to resist. The complacent oppressed, for example, may refuse to acknowledge or convince themselves into ignoring the fact that their privilege comes from the very subordination of the inferior.⁷ Reflecting on their privileged position is indispensable because it makes sure the oppressed see the world in the right way and resist for the right reason. 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.

⁶ I take genuine resistance to be self-aware.

⁷ I will discuss the nature of such privilege in more detail in section two.

A detailed account of how the oppressed become complacent is beyond the scope of this paper, but I will end this section by considering some possibilities. One possible explanation is just straight-up laziness on the part of the oppressed. It could also be that some complacent oppressed are too arrogant and entitled to reflect honestly on their current level of resistance and their privilege. If the oppressed believe they are *helping* the less privileged ones of their oppressed group, rather than combating a system that harms both themselves and others, then it's no surprise that they lapse into complacency.

2. The Moral Obligation to Resist Complacency

I have introduced the general features of complacency. The question now becomes what the complacent oppressed should do about it; particularly, whether they are obligated to resist complacency. To answer this question, we need to first ask whether there is a general obligation to resist and what grounds that obligation. Theorists of oppression have recently taken up this question and successfully established the *prima facie* obligation to resist one's own oppression. In this section, I further the discussion by contending that there is *also* an obligation to resist complacency with respect to one's own oppression. This obligation to resist complacency is absolvable. It might be reasonable for the complacent oppressed to carry on their lives without fulfilling the duty to combat their moral failing if the cost of performing the obligation is overly high (i.e., disproportional to their privileged position). Nonetheless, the oppressed are obligated to resist complacency because not doing so would significantly harm both themselves and others or allow significant harm to continue.⁸

Before proposing my argument for the duty to resist complacency, let's first consider how power functions *within* liberation movements since it's these power dynamics that give us

⁸ I do not use "harm" to mean direct, physical harm to individuals. For theorists of oppression who have also used "harm" to refer to injustice that goes beyond direct, physical harm to individuals, see, for example, Cudd (2006).

reasons to hold complacent oppressed agents accountable for this obligation. Take Crenshaw's basement analogy. She 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 identity on the shoulders of those who are multiply oppressed. Given the singularity of their oppression, those on the top are normally the ones that 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 get out 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 dynamics among the oppressed also prompt feminist scholars (Bailey 1998; Collins 1993; Lorde 1984; McIntosh 1989; He Yin 1907/2013) to investigate the nature of privilege. 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 which [one] was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (10). White privilege manifests itself in every aspect of our society. Whites are not subject to racial profiling; they don't need to worry about being called "Chinese virus" in the street; white professors are more likely to be taken seriously as knowers of the subject matter by their students. While whites' lives are portrayed as morally neutral, their privilege entails "conferred dominance" over non-whites (McIntosh, 12). White privilege is not the only kind of privilege in oppressive contexts. Those who are singularly burdened on Crenshaw's account would fit into McIntosh's notion of privilege. Getting closer to the exit of the basement is a

privilege because it is an unearned advantage conferred systematically at the expense of those who are multiply oppressed.

Being in a relatively privileged position generates a particular duty to resist complacency about one's own oppression. For not doing so would significantly harm both themselves and others or allow significant harm to continue. Both the self-regarding and other-regarding harm derive from the privileged position of the complacent oppressed. Imagine a white woman named Maggie who works with a group of sexist male-coworkers in a male-dominated law firm. As an Ivy League graduate, Maggie used to believe her privilege entails responsibility. To make law a better profession for women, she used to call out sexist comments and behavior (e.g., male workers only gossip with her and never discuss technical topics with her) whenever she encountered them and push for policy changes within the company. After a year of working in the same company, she thinks she has done her part to combat the sexist culture. She now only occasionally retweet posts about gender equality in the workplace, ignoring the fact that she continues to benefit from elitism and her skin color.

Maggie's co-workers may take her inconsequential resistance as her calming down. They may think she probably did not know the "conventions" as she was new to the field. Maggie's preceding calling-out, as a result, might not be taken seriously as a genuine attempt to fight against sexism. If resistance isn't viewed as resistance, then those sexist co-workers will likely not feel threatened. Since their sense of control over Maggie is not jeopardized, there's no reason that they will not continue to make sexist jokes and blatantly question Maggie's ability. Worse, they may even disregard Maggie's future genuine resistance. Even though complacent Maggie still speaks out on social media, her sexist co-workers and boss would tend not to her action as resistance to their sexism.

Remember Maggie's privilege derives from standing on the shoulder of her fellow oppressed agents who are less privileged. While she may not directly cause the oppression of women of color lawyers, it's undeniable that her privilege not only results partly from their oppression, but also reinforces their predicament. Once the sexist norms in the workplace are further solidified, those at the bottom will face greater challenges. For example, women of color employees may have less promotion opportunities than their white peers even if they are equally qualified. Maggie's privilege certainly doesn't render her immune from sexism, but it does give her more resources and power to resist meaningfully. If the privileged oppressed do not make an effort to combat complacency, then they, just like Maggie, not only solidify their own oppression with their oppressors, allowing and potentially inflicting significant harm on themselves, but also worsen the already precarious status quo of the less privileged.

The harm to the complacent oppressed themselves and that to others also reinforce each other. 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). By overcoming complacency, privileged oppressed agents pull those at the very bottom out of the basement, thereby challenging the system that harms themselves as well.

The duty to resist complacency cannot be discharged by simply becoming the kind of person who doesn't do what she should but recognizes it and feels guilty about it. Nor can it be discharged by simply engaging in meaningful resistance. The other two aspects of complacency should be taken seriously. Self-satisfaction, as aforementioned, not only results from complacent oppressed agents' epistemic irresponsibility, but also prevents them from developing the right kind of knowledge of the efficacy of their resistance and the role they play in consolidating

oppression. One doesn't avoid being complacent by carrying out meaningful resistance alone. She has to be psychologically and epistemically well-positioned to resist.

3. Accommodating the Obligation to Resist Complacency

It's tempting to think that discussing the obligation to resist complacency is unnecessary because it follows from the more general duty to resist oppression. I don't deny that the former does follow from the latter, but it doesn't entail that focusing on the former is unnecessary partly because Silvermint's well-being-based theory (2013) fails to account for this duty. While many philosophers' accounts (e.g., Cudd 2006; Hay 2011, 2013) have the potential to accommodate the obligation to combat complacency, the fact that they don't consider power dynamics among oppressed agents, as aforementioned, runs the risk of overlooking a qualitatively different (i.e., privilege-based) ground for resistance and painting a distorted and generalized picture of oppressed agents.

In this section, I continue to demonstrate the necessity of focusing on the duty to combat complacency by investigating how this obligation sharpens prominent arguments of resistance and fills a gap within Silvermint's account. Taking a stance about whether each individual account of resistance is compelling goes beyond the scope of this paper; I instead focus on whether these theories can accommodate the duty to resist complacency.

3.1 Self-regarding Reasons to Resist Complacency

Let's start from a prominent well-being-based account of resistance that cannot accommodate the duty to combat complacency. The harm to oppressed people's well-being motivates Silvermint's argument on the duty to resist one's own oppression. He holds that resistance is obligatory because doing so not only protects but promotes oppressed people's objective well-being under oppressive conditions. By "well-being," Silvermint means one's high

autonomous ability, one's satisfyingly overall life prospects, and one's pursuit of valuable aims. He highlights "objective" because he believes oppression doesn't 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—that is "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).⁹

Consider Silvermint's "successful trailblazer," a woman whose career is well-established. Both the successful trailblazer and the early career trailblazer are denied a promotion simply because they are women. It seems morally permissible for the early career trailblazer to resist the unfair sexist promotion with a self-regarding intention (i.e., to get a deserved promotion), but not as permissible for the successful trailblazer to resist for the same reason. The different expectations come from the fact that the successful trailblazer has access to greater amount of material and epistemic resources, which renders her able to resist sexism in the workplace more generally. Silvermint concedes that the successful trailblazer "can be reasonably expected to do more than she is...and is thus open to criticism" (2017, 38). However, he contends that a self-regarding motivation should remain a good way of resisting regardless of which career stage the trailblazer is at because the obligation to "help her fellow victims" is a separate duty from the obligation to resist her own oppression (2017, 38). Since Silvermint views the successful trailblazer as carrying out meaningful resistance (i.e., her resistance is not undercut), he would be

⁹ Silvermint holds that the obligation to resist doesn't 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.

unlikely to characterize her as complacent. He, therefore, wouldn't hold her accountable for resisting complacency with respect to her own oppression.

I believe Silvermint's interpretation of this example gives us good reasons to see why the successful trailblazer is responsible for complacency about her own oppression. As Silvermint admits, the successful trailblazer's resistance to sexism is inconsequential, presumably in the same way Luna's resistance to homophobia is. That is, the successful trailblazer doesn't carry out *any* of the other possible and more effective acts of resistance that is not overly costly like sitting on hiring committees to make sure the company is considering an equal number of women applicants. Though Silvermint doesn't make it clear whether the successful trailblazer is satisfied with her actions, it's not implausible that he believes she is, given that he views her self-regarding reason as a legitimate reason to resist. The successful trailblazer is clearly responsible for not carrying out more actions to resist sexism in the workplace because, according to Silvermint's description, she has access to the truth that sexism is commonplace in the field, and she has the resources to do something about it without sacrificing a lot of other goods. We may also find fault with her lack of reflection on her privilege. If she realizes that her privilege comes partly from the subordination of other underprivileged persons in her oppressed group, then she should know that there is no such thing as "helping" her fellow victims because she herself is a source and a beneficiary of their oppression. Her complacency, hence, stems from the facts that she fails to speak out, that she is satisfied with her meaningless resistance against sexism, that she is fully aware of her being in a position to challenge the oppressive dynamic in the field but falsely believes in an irresponsible manner that her self-regarding resistance is meaningful, and that she fails to reflect on the sources and harms of her own privilege.

Silvermint also admits the harm generated by the successful trailblazer's behavior. He states that her failure to speak out runs the risk of "contributing to oppression in a way that an equally silent early-career trailblazer just isn't" and corroborates the sentiment that "there's no more sexism in their profession" (2017, 38). On my view, these harms constitute the *precise* reason why the successful trailblazer *is* obligated to combat complacency about her own oppression, whereas Silvermint might only hold her responsible for resisting complacency about *others's* oppression. In short, the successful trailblazer example flags a gap in Silvermint's theory.

The gap has two closely related implications. For one, it entails the necessity of introducing complacency to our discussions of resistance, for the duty to resist complacency, on Silvermint's account, doesn't naturally follow from the duty to combat oppression. Second, it implies a binary understanding of power in the literature of the duty to resist. The successful trailblazer is privileged compared to the early career trailblazer, but both are subsumed under one single category, namely the broad group of oppressed agents, on Silvermint's account. He doesn't pay attention to the power dynamics within this large group, let alone the special obligations of the privileged oppressed. The lack of attention renders it acceptable for the privileged ones to benefit from other oppressed people without doing anything to change the status quo. For future well-being-based theories to work, they need to pay special attention to inner-group difference among oppressed agents and make sure the privileged ones are not let off the hook. One way to do so is to adopt, in addition to a resistant sense of self, a socially embedded, and thus interconnected, sense of self that considers how we are related to others as privileged or oppressed. The successful trailblazer's well-being is improved given her

established career. If she also considers how her sense of self is connected to others, then she may avoid succumbing to complacency.

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 ones to denounce compliance with oppression on the grounds that it signals servility rather than self-respect. Adopting a Kantian approach, Carol Hay 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 claims that "a rational [being] exists as an end in itself" (2012, 4:429). Based on this claim, Kant proposes 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" (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 claims that the obligation to resist one's own oppression is what Kant calls an "imperfect duty." It is an "imperfect duty" because the oppressed are not obligated to resist every single time, at all costs, and in any specific way. Although this imperfect duty doesn't require any specific action, it does require one to set the goal of resisting one's own oppression. If one acquiesces in one's own oppression and is reluctant to do anything to ameliorate the predicament, then one violates this imperfect duty. Like other imperfect duties, the obligation to resist one's own oppression permits two latitudes: the "latitude in which action to take" includes different actions from which the oppressed could choose to perform to resist their oppression; the

“latitude in refraining from action” leaves room for the oppressed not to resist every instance of their own oppression. As long as one doesn’t comply with their oppression, refraining from resistance occasionally wouldn’t necessarily be detrimental to one’s rational capacities.

The Kantian argument can be applied to the obligation to resist complacency. That is, one’s obligation to protect one’s rational capacities can also translate into the obligation to resist complacency. As aforementioned, the complacent oppressed are self-satisfied with their inadequate resistance and are epistemically accountable for recognizing both their privilege and what meaningful resistance requires. In order to act in a complacent manner, they may have to deceive themselves into believing that they have fulfilled the duty. Since self-deceit is a special kind of mendacity, the oppressed violate what Kant calls a perfect duty—the duty that can never be obviated by any rational persons and under any circumstances—not to lie.¹⁰ The complacent oppressed exist as ends in themselves, so they should respect and protect their own rational capacities.¹¹ By lying to themselves, the complacent oppressed are not adequately respecting their own rational autonomy and not allowing themselves to make informed, rational decisions that reflect their autonomy. They, as a result, are obligated to perform the duty to resist complacency to protect their rational capacities. To successfully accommodate this duty, Hay, along with other autonomy-based theorists, need to make sure the sense of self on their accounts is socially embedded. Only by honestly reflecting on their social position and current level of resistance can oppressed agents avoid lapsing into complacency. Taking the duty to combat complacency into consideration, hence, would hone autonomy-based theories of resistance

¹⁰ For Kant’s discussions of the moral status of lying, see Kant pp.389, 402-403, 422, and 429-430. While Kant doesn’t discuss self-deception per se, his claim can still be applied to this special case of lying.

¹¹ I take the complacent oppressed to be rational beings. Agency may be severely compromised in the most oppressive circumstances, but these oppressed people are not the ones I am thinking of. For an overview of agency under oppression, see Khader and McGill (2022).

insofar as it highlights the role that social relations play in forming and perpetuating oppressive structures.

Disagreeing with accounts of resistance that make noncompliance with oppressive norms 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” (2021, 238). Oppressed agents experience countless “double binds,” situations in which one is worse off regardless of what one does (Frye, 7). The ubiquity of double binds prompts Khader to contend that noncompliance almost always comes with costs, and that the oppressed oftentimes consider compliance the best option for themselves (2021, 233-236). She, thus, proposes an account of self-regarding duty that doesn’t expect oppressed individuals not to comply with derogatory norms. This alternative is to cultivate what she calls “a counterhegemonic normative perspective,” from which an oppressed agent sees herself as equal to others and oppressive social structures as impeding her from reaching this status (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, the oppressed need to reflect on their privileged position and their current level of resistance. A counterhegemonic normative perspective would allow the complacent oppressed to see themselves as benefiting from the subordination of other members of certain oppressed groups and come to the realization that not using their privilege to bring about structural changes

is morally worrisome. While short-term compliance may be acceptable under certain conditions, it's not always what the complacent oppressed should do. Introducing the duty to combat complacency would consolidate Khader's account in the sense that it holds *all* privileged oppressed responsible for always carrying out proportionate action to oppression.

3.2 Other-regarding Reasons to Resist Complacency

Other-regarding reasons invoked as grounds to resist one's own oppression have the potential to accommodate the duty to combat complacency, and introducing this obligation to the literature can refine these accounts. Ann Cudd argues that not fulfilling the obligation to resist one's own oppression harms others because it reinforces oppressive norms. The harm to others is evident in cases of "oppression by choice," where one has to choose between resisting or participating in oppression (2006, 200). Because resistance exposes an oppressed person to danger, one risks harm to oneself if one resists. If one doesn't resist, then one doesn't have to undergo said risks. Although compliance protects the person from these risks, it harms others in that it perpetuates oppression against others who share same oppressed identities. In many cases, compliance enforces oppressive norms on the person's fellow oppressed group members. For example, Cudd claims that a privileged woman's decision to become a stay-at-home mother reinforces the oppressive gendered division of labor (1994). Cudd urges an oppressed person to weigh the consequences of both actions and opt for the one that generates "the least undeserved harm" (2006, 199). If it's 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).

The same argument is potentially applicable to the obligation to resist complacency. Being complacent reinforces oppressive stereotypes, and thus consolidates oppression and

renders resistance more challenging. Maggie's complacency, for example, risks reinforcing the oppressive norm that women are not intelligent enough to engage in technical conversations. After the norm is solidified, not only Maggie but also other less privileged women in the field may face greater difficulty when attempting to change the nature of the conversations they are included in, in the workplace. Another reason why Cudd's account is an appropriate candidate for accommodating the duty to combat complacency is because it's focused on the privileged oppressed. To demonstrate the coerciveness of oppression by choice cases, Cudd uses the example in which an imagined couple, Larry and Lisa, jointly decide to have the woman become a stay-at-home mother to maximize the benefits of their family. They have reached the agreement that it's best for one of them to stay at home to care for their children, and that household work is not naturally women's work. 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). Lisa, as Rosa Terlazzo points out, is privileged insofar as she can opt out of work to care for her family, whereas this option is not available to working class women (2020, 401). This unique, and presumably unwitting, focus of Cudd's account renders it particularly well-suited to accommodate the obligation to resist complacency, for the complacent oppressed are also privileged. For Cudd's theory to fully account for the duty to resist complacency, it should also urge the privileged oppressed to reflect on their social position and actively carry out actions that promote structural changes. In other words, focusing on the duty to combat complacency would sharpen Cudd's theory of resistance by attending to the power dynamics among the oppressed.

Another set of other-regarding arguments for the duty to resist is grounded in the unique epistemic position of the oppressed. Standpoint theorists (e.g., Harding 1993, 2004) argue that knowledge derives from one's social position. Oppressed agents, compared to oppressors, have epistemic privilege insofar as they know what it is like to be in a subordinate position and how to navigate an unjust world. Because the oppressed are the only ones that have access to this knowledge, their participation in resistance is necessary, which further entails that they have a duty to combat oppression (Vasanthakumar 2018). Many epistemologists submit that oppressed agents' epistemic privilege alone doesn't necessarily entail that they have a duty to do so. They back up their arguments with other reasons such as everyone has a duty to contribute to creating just institutions (Harvey 2010) and help others when they can do so at minimal cost (Singer 1972). Granted, some oppressed agents are unable to resist their own oppression due to lack of resources. But the complacent oppressed are uniquely positioned to resist for epistemic reasons. Their previous resistance demonstrates their recognition of the status quo. Their relatively privileged position provides them with both the necessary epistemic resources and the material condition to resist. While some epistemic accounts of resistance (e.g., Vasanthakumar 2018) can straightforwardly accommodate the duty to overcome complacency, others (e.g., Harvey 2010; Singer 1972) need to reflect on what those with epistemic privilege should do about their knowledge. Introducing this duty, thus, would prompt feminist epistemologists to consider the implications of being in a position to bring about structural and meaningful changes.

4. Objections

In this final section of the paper, I will respond to three objections. The "overburdensome objection" concerns whether the duty to combat complacency is overly taxing for oppressed agents. The "victim-blaming objection" questions whether holding oppressed agents responsible

for resisting complacency unfairly places a heavy burden on individuals who are already victims of oppression. The “collective action objection” takes issue with the efficacy of individual resistance to complacency.

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 my account might seem taxing at first, it’s not *overly* costly. I don’t deny that resistance almost always carries costs.¹² But meaningful resistance, on my account, is by no means maximizing resistance in every possible way and at all times. It instead only requires the complacent oppressed to engage in effective forms of resistance that are *in proportion to* their privileged identity. I don’t assume that the complacent oppressed always have to prioritize opposing oppression over other goods, but their privilege does give them more resources and ability to carry out more effective resistance.

There are forms of meaningful resistance that are not only effective, but also 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), they are likely to be outweighed by how extremely rewarding this practice is. For example, many senior-level women faculty of color choose to mentor graduate women students of color partly because they wouldn’t be who they are today without the support they received earlier in their academic career. They want to pay it forward by mentoring the next generation of scholars from marginalized groups, hoping the male- and white-dominated profession can presumably be more inclusive in one day. Achieving this end is not even a necessary condition for their mentorship. They wouldn’t think their mentorship is

¹² For detailed analyses of this view, see Fakhoury (2021) and Khader (2021).

useless even if their mentees eventually decide not to pursue a career in the academy due to, for example, financial reasons. Mentorship itself can bring them direct joy. What I want to emphasize is that we should not only be aware of the costs of resistance, but also appreciate its benefits.

The view that there is no resistance that is not overly burdensome also has a worrisome assumption, namely resistance must be public. Effective and meaningful resistance doesn't have to be visible to others. Nor does it have to be recognized as such by a third party.¹³ Effective resistance may even be seen as compliance from a third-person point of view. A woman of color, for example, may choose not to report workplace racism that she experienced even if she has the resources to do so. One may see her silence as acquiescence, but she made this decision because she thought that filing a complaint wouldn't worth her time and that the energy would be better spent on career development. Because thriving in a predominately white space is a win in its own right, this woman's decision to ignore racist microaggressions is indeed effective resistance to racism. Even if an agent does comply with oppression, short-term compliance, sometimes, may even be necessary for future or long-term resistance. If the same woman of color chooses to ignore microaggressions until after she takes up a leadership role in the company, then her current silence (i.e., short-term compliance) is necessary for her speaking up in the future. Self-care and periodical celebration can be legitimate forms of resistance as well. In fact, no one can be a fair judge of others's level of resistance given the fact that none of us can know everything about an oppressed agent except herself. The oppressed are their own judges. They should reflect honestly on their own behavior and make changes when needed.

4.2 The Victim-blaming Objection

¹³ For an example of this type of resistance, see Fakhoury (2021).

An intimately related but separate concern is victim-blaming. Holding the oppressed accountable for resisting their own oppression risks blaming them for creating their plight. My account does find the complacent oppressed blameworthy, but I place my emphasize on what to do with that blame. Iris Young suggests that we hold oppressed agents responsible as a forward-looking notion, meaning that they have a job to do (2011). She insists that blaming and pointing out when someone has failed her responsibility, isn't productive because it makes her focus on shifting the blame and working on making sure she no longer be held accountable. Martha Nussbaum takes issues with Young's approach, arguing that individuals have very little reason to change without accountability (2009). I agree with Nussbaum's modal of responsibility. If we don't hold the complacent oppressed to account, then there are worries that they will not change and that the harms caused by their complacency will not be alleviated. Acknowledging that they are blameworthy is not the end of the story because the reactive attitude we have should also be focused on is what to do with that blame. If we only focus on making them feel bad, then the complacent oppressed aren't likely going to be shamed into action. Instead, we can still blame while trying to ask them "What are you going to do to change?" That would put the ball back in their court to take responsibility for what they haven't done with what they are going to do.

4.3 The Collective Action Objection

It's also tempting to think that holding individual privileged agent responsible for combating complacency is useless given the structural nature of oppression.¹⁴ Frye uses the bird cage analogy to illustrate why oppression is systematic. If we look at one wire of a bird cage, then it might be difficult to see why the bird is trapped. But if we take a step back and look at the whole cage, then it shouldn't be implausible to understand why the bird is immobilized (4-7).

¹⁴ Doan (2014) raises a similar concern in his critique of Kawall's account of complacency, arguing that environmental issues can only be addressed collectively.

Similarly, if we take a microscopic approach to such practices as heterosexual women becoming stay-at-home wives, it might be hard to see it is oppressive. One may even argue that women benefit from men taking care of finances. But if we look at this practice in conjunction with other sexist practices (e.g., the gender wage gap) in our patriarchal society, we can see that it signals women's labor not being valued and compensated. Because oppression is systematic, one may contend that for any resistance to be effective, it needs to be collective and often must happen on the institutional level.

I agree that collective resistance is necessary to eliminate oppression, but it doesn't entail that individual resistance is futile. The efficacy of resistance is less dependent on whether it's collective or individual; it instead rests on whether resistance challenges systems of oppression. If an act of collective resistance doesn't tackle structural injustice, then it's meaningless. The privileged status of the complacent oppressed renders them capable of doing something meaningful to change the system or at least push for structural changes. The successful trailblazer, for example, can urge the company to institute anti-sexist policies. In fact, this objection points out a case in which privileged oppressed people may lapse into complacency. If they only engage in ineffective forms of resistance (e.g., changing their Facebook profile filter), rather than pushing for structural changes, then they are complacent. I'm not alone in this individualistic approach to responsibility. One of Robin Zheng's (2018) critiques of Iris Young's Social Connections Model of responsibility (2011) is that it doesn't specify the contribution of individual resistance to structural change. To improve on Young's account, Zheng proposes a new model—the Role-Ideal Model, arguing that everyone is individually responsible for structural injustice “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 the oppressed are obligated to resist complacency with respect to their own oppression. This paper contributed to the literature in at least two ways: (1) it extends the literature on moral complacency by developing an account of complacency in the context of resisting oppression; (2) it identifies at least one gap in the literature of the duty to resist oppression and sharpens prominent accounts of resistance, and thus it points out a possible direction of further philosophical exploration. This paper calls attention to an undertheorized failure in resisting oppression. More work needs to be done to explore what *exactly* we should do to resist complacency and what the most effective ways to resist this moral failing are.

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