RATIONALITY AND OPPRESSION:
A DEFENCE OF THE OBLIGATION TO RESIST OPPRESSION

DISSERTATION

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In this dissertation, I argue that people who are oppressed have an obligation to resist their own oppression. While this argument is intended to hold for all people who are oppressed, I focus specifically on the obligation that women have to resist sexist oppression. I argue that this obligation is an instance of a larger species of obligation: to respect and protect some morally important feature or features of persons. In particular, I argue that Kant’s notion of humanity captures these morally important features of persons and that his arguments for the claim that humanity must be respected can be used to show that there is an obligation to protect one’s rational nature. I give an account of how oppression can harm people’s rational nature and show how resisting oppression is an instance of fulfilling the obligation to respect and protect one’s rational nature. And I emphasize how the obligation to protect rational nature applies in a special way to one’s own rational nature and thus that the obligation to resist one’s oppression is an obligation to the self.
For Scott.
I’m grateful to the members of my dissertation committee for their feedback and their encouragement. Thanks to Louise Antony for being the first to encourage me to pursue the ideas I develop in this dissertation, and for sticking with me until the end. Thanks to Tim Schroeder for coming on board when I most needed it, and for helping me—nay, compelling me!—to see this project through to completion. Thanks to Sigrún Svavarsdóttir for reading so many drafts of this dissertation so very carefully, and for the careful and thoughtful advice that always resulted. Thanks to Richard Samuels for stepping in at the very last minute.

In 2008, I presented some of the ideas found in Chapters 3 and 5 at the Society for Analytical Feminism’s conference at the University of Kentucky, at the University of Dayton’s Richard R. Baker Colloquium on the topic of “Building Coalitions Across Difference,” and to audiences at Chicago State University, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Iowa State University, the University of Kentucky, the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, the University of Minnesota-Moorhead, The Ohio State University, and the University of Tennessee. I published a preliminary exploration of some of the main issues that motivate this dissertation as “Whether to Ignore Them and Spin: Moral Obligations to Resist Sexual Harassment,” *Hypatia* 20 (2005): 94-108. I presented earlier versions of that paper, in 2004 and 2005 respectively, at the Society for Analytic Feminism’s
conference at the University of Western Ontario and the 32nd Conference on Value Inquiry at Louisiana State University.

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Let’s begin with some examples.

In his essay “Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All,” David Foster Wallace describes his visit to the Illinois State Fair for Harper’s magazine.¹ While his friend—whom he calls Native Companion because she’s a local—is riding one of the fair’s rides the men operating the ride stop it as she’s upside down so that her dress falls over her head and they can “ogl[e] her nethers.”² What follows is the exchange that takes place between Wallace and Native Companion immediately after she gets off the ride.

“Did you sense something kind of sexual-harassmentish going on through that whole little sick exercise?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake … it was fun.” …

“They were looking up your dress. You couldn’t see them, maybe. They hung you upside down at a great height and made your dress fall up and ogled you. They shaded their eyes and made comments to each other. I saw the whole thing.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” …

“So this doesn’t bother you? As a Midwesterner, you’re unbothered? Or did you just not have an accurate sense of what was going on back there?”

“So if I noticed or I didn’t, why does it have to be my deal? What, because there’s assholes in the world I don’t get to ride on The Zipper? I

1 David Foster Wallace, “Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All,” A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997).

2 Wallace, 99.
don’t get to ever spin? Maybe I shouldn’t ever go to the pool or ever get all girled up, just out of fear of assholes?” …

“So I’m curious, then, about what it would have taken back there, say, to have gotten you to lodge some sort of complaint with the Fair’s management.”

“You’re so fucking innocent …,” she says. “Assholes are just assholes. What’s getting hot and bothered going to do about it except keep me from getting to have fun?” …

“This is potentially key. … This may be just the sort of regional politico-sexual contrast the swanky East-Coast magazine is keen for. The core value informing a kind of willed politico-sexual stoicism on your part is your prototypically Midwestern appreciation of fun … whereas on the East Coast, politico-sexual indignation is the fun. In New York, a woman who’d been hung upside down and ogled would go get a whole lot of other women together and there’d be this frenzy of politico-sexual indignation. They’d confront the ogler. File an injunction. Management’d find itself litigating expensively—violation of a woman’s right to nonharassed fun. I’m telling you. Personal and political fun merge somewhere just east of Cleveland, for women.” …

“They might ought to try just climbing on and spinning and ignoring assholes and saying Fuck ‘em. That’s pretty much all you can do with assholes.”

Right, then. Is Native Companion on to something here? Is she right, that there is nothing she is obligated to do in this situation? I want to argue that she’s wrong about this. By allowing the carnies to get away with harassing her, Native Companion is, in effect, acquiescing in her oppression. And this is something I will argue that she must not do because she, like all oppressed people, has an obligation to resist her oppression. On to the next example. In 1944, the year after the Great Bengal Famine, 45.6% of widowers surveyed ranked their health as either “ill” or “indifferent.” Only 2.5% of widows made the same judgement. This subjective ranking belied their actual situations, since as a


4 I’ve discussed this example elsewhere as well. See Carol Hay, “Whether to Ignore Them and Spin: Moral Obligations to Resist Sexual Harassment,” Hypatia 20 (2005): 94-108. There, I argued that women have an obligation to confront the men who sexually harass them. This paper was a preliminary exploration of some of the main issues that motivate this dissertation; as will become apparent, I now think the conclusion I defended there is wrong on various points of detail.
group the widows’ basic health and nutrition tended to be particularly abysmal. These women were starving and yet most of them claimed not to be sick. One explanation for this unwarranted stoicism is that, unlike men who were similarly situated, these women reacted to the scarcity of food by coming to believe that what little food there was shouldn’t be wasted on them. Amartya Sen has argued that the reason the Bengali women formed these desires while the men did not is that they had already internalized prevalent sexist social mores that granted women’s interests less importance than men’s. Because these women didn’t believe that their interests mattered as much as others’, they didn’t experience their starvation as worth complaining about.

It’s a terrible thing that, to satisfy the less dire needs of the men around them, these women were willing to give up the food that they needed to live. And it’s a terrible thing that this happened because these women came to believe that their own needs were unimportant when compared to those of men. But I also think that the women have something to answer for. Rather than standing up for themselves, they accepted starvation. And, when they were being conditioned by sexist social norms to think that this was right, they did not (or did not effectively) reject this idea. In short, while these women were terribly wronged by an oppressive society, they also wronged themselves by failing to resist this oppression.

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Here’s a third example. In her book *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World*, Linda Hirshman looks at highly educated women who choose to “opt-out” of full-time employment to stay home with their children.

The Ultimate Bride, graduate of an Ivy League college and then an English acting school, with a most prestigious master’s degree to boot, was the ideal subject for the *New York Times* featured Sunday wedding column “Vows.” Walking down the aisle at her family farm, she wed her perfect counterpart, also master’s-degree-bearing, and a rising star in the competitive world of global policy.

When she married, the ultimate bride was using her skills and training at a worthy nonprofit. Eight years later, when I tried to interview her for my book on marriage after feminism, I could not find her—or most of the other women who announced their weddings in the *New York Times* that month. He, on the other hand, Googled right up, on the Web site of his current employer, a consulting firm. I called him up.

“Where’s your wife?”

“At home in Brooklyn taking care of our daughter.”

So were the rest. Eight-five percent of the thirty-plus January brides in the *New York Times* had left the workplace in whole or in part. All of them were highly educated—degrees in business, including MBAs, lawyers, journalists, and opera singer, doctors, master’s of higher education. All of them had worked full time after graduation. Ninety percent of them had had babies since 1996. Half the mothers were not working at all. Roughly one-third were in part-time work at varying distances from their education and training. And six of them were working full-time.

As we’ll see below, one of the many things that is wrong with women like the Ultimate Bride sacrificing “their education, talents, and prospects to their spouses’ aspirations and children’s needs” is that doing so severely limits their future options and makes them financially dependent on the good will of their husbands. This puts them at risk of exploitation. Because the choice to make these sacrifices occurs against a background of sexist social institutions that *expect* women to shoulder a disproportionate share of the burden of

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7 Hirshman, 6-8.

8 Hirshman, 17.
childrearing, when the Ultimate Bride makes this choice she is, in effect, acquiescing in her oppression. And this is something that I'll argue that she has an obligation not to do.

And here’s a fourth example. Uma Narayan has described the practices of women from the Sufi Pirzada community of Old Delhi who live secluded lives within their homes and must veil themselves when they are in public. When asked, these women voice a variety of complaints about these practices:

Many complain strenuously about the sheer physical discomforts that attend veiling in really hot weather and about how it makes them giddy and faint and about being unable to see properly and tripping into drains. Many even have a wry take on the esthetics of the burqua, commenting with exasperated amusement that it makes them look like water buffalos!

Many of their complaints go further. They recognize how purdah [(seclusion)] and veiling are implicated in the more general constraints of their lives. Many talk about how purdah has prevented many of them from learning elementary skills such as crossing heavily-trafficked roads or finding their way around the local streets, and made them embarrassed and frightened to ask directions of strangers. They acknowledge how the lack of these skills keeps them dependent on male kinsmen accompanying them, even when they venture out on minor errands. They recognize how purdah and veiling have limited their access to education and their social mobility in terms of shopping or visiting relatives. They have even kept them ignorant about much that happens in their immediate social world—self-deprecatingly referring to themselves as “frogs in a well.” Many older women talk with envy about younger women who have had the luck to be married into families that are not as strict about veiling or purdah; many of the younger women express the hope that they will be married into such families.

But, at the same time, many Pirzada women claim to have a wide variety of reasons for participating in these practices:

Outside the home, wearing the burqua signifies womanly modesty and propriety. Many older women admit that despite its discomfort, they would feel naked if they went out without their burqua. For many, wearing the

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10 Narayan, 420.
burqa is an integral part of their social identity and sense of self, and the social discomfort they would feel without it outweighs its physical inconveniences. Others shrewdly note the practical and strategic advantages of wearing the burqa—under its cover they can go out in a hurry without changing the old clothes they were wearing for housework, or they can sneak off to the cinema with a friend after telling their husbands they are going to the bazaar, the husbands being none the wiser even if they pass them in the streets. Some younger Pirzada women acknowledge that they veil because of the insistence of strict family elders or because the community would disparage their reputation, hurting their prospects for a good marriage, were they to go unveiled. …

For many Pirzada women, the significance of veiling and purdah goes beyond its links to their gender identity—they are also markers of other linked aspects of social identity that the women value. For instance, the Pirzada claim superior Syed status in virtue of being descendents of the Prophet’s daughter Fatima. Adherence to veiling and purdah signify their superior standing vis-à-vis other Muslim women, a standing Pirzada women value. … In addition, Pirzada women understand that purdah and veiling have important economic implications. Pirzada men are custodians of a popular local shrine of a Sufi saint and depend on the income that the pilgrims bring. Economic reliance on the shrine provides an important reason for appearing “orthodox”—and veiling and purdah are important markers of such orthodoxy. Their veiling also functions as a marker of visible Muslim presence in the midst of a Hindu majority. In this context it constitutes a public signifier of religious and ethnic identity.\textsuperscript{11}

Here, too, we have an example of people who are acquiescing in their oppression.

The Pirzada women accept severe restrictions on their ability to live their lives in public freely; to accept these restrictions, I contend, is to accept their oppression.

What are we to make of these people? What are we to make of the woman who doesn’t think she should have to bother confronting the men who have sexually harassed her? Women who react to a famine by not wanting food anymore? The woman who throws away her prestigious education to stay at home with her child? Women who abide by cultural practices that forbid them from appearing in public alone or unhindered by cumbersome veils? Have any of these women behaved in morally permissible ways?

\textsuperscript{11} Narayan, 420-421.
According to the account I defend in this dissertation, none of these women’s choices is unproblematic. This is because these women are, in different ways, acquiescing in their oppression. All of these women’s actions take place under oppressive social conditions. Oppression structures both the kind and the quality of options that are available to them. But this is more apparent in some cases than in others. The Pirzada and Bengali women face restrictions that are in many ways much more extreme than those faced by Native Companion or the Ultimate Bride. The Pirzada women are so dependent on their male kinsmen that they can’t venture out into public, cross a busy street, or find their way through their own neighbourhood without a chaperone. The Bengali women’s sense of self-worth is so damaged that they can’t even desire the basic nutrition they need to survive. Native Companion, on the other hand, can’t ride on the Zipper without having to deal with a couple of lascivious creeps: an annoyance, to be sure, but hardly in line with the oppressive restrictions faced by the Bengali and Pirzada women. And some might argue that the Ultimate Bride isn’t restricted at all: she has the freedom to stay at home with her child while her husband must earn a living for the family. But the Ultimate Bride’s choice to forego a career actually takes place in the face of incentive structures that can make it difficult for her to choose otherwise; and, furthermore, this choice will, in all likelihood, constrain her ability to make other choices in the future. And Native Companion’s experience of sexual harassment takes place in a self-reinforcing cultural context where the sexual objectification of women is rampant and where the gendered sexual roles of dominance and submission that derive from this objectification result in disproportionately high rates of sexual violence against women.\textsuperscript{12} Of course, this is not to suggest that Native Companion and the Ultimate

\textsuperscript{12} The most influential defenders of this claim have been Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. See, for example, Catharine MacKinnon, \textit{Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex
Bride’s experiences of oppression are as bad as the experiences of the Pirzada and Bengali women; it’s just to point out that all four of these cases share something in common. Oppression makes these women’s lives worse by constraining the kind and quality of options available to them compared to the kind and quality of options that are available to similarly situated men. And yet in each of these cases, the women seem to be choosing their fate, or acquiescing in their oppression.

The self-imposed nature of these oppressive constraints is particularly vivid in the cases of the Bengali women and the Ultimate Bride. No one has to actively prevent the Bengali women from seeking to claim their fair share of what little food there is available to them; because they believe they deserve food less than others, they choose to not seek it out. Likewise, the Ultimate Bride was not forced to sacrifice her career so that her child could be raised by a stay-at-home parent; she would claim to have chosen her lifestyle freely. These women do not experience their choices as constrained—or at least they do not experience their choices as any more constrained than the choices of the similarly situated men they know. In each of these cases, these women’s subjective reports of their experiences bear this out. The Bengali women don’t want food and thus don’t feel wronged when less food is made available for them than for others. The Ultimate Bride loves her child, thinks that staying at home to take care of her is more important than an abandoned career at a “worthy nonprofit,” and might even believe that as a woman she would be guilty of neglecting her child were she to refuse to sacrifice her career in this way. These women have internalized social norms—about their relative worth, about the social roles and attendant obligations.

that are appropriate for people like them—that ultimately contribute to their oppression.

This phenomenon is referred to as internalized oppression.

It seems that in some respects the Pirzada women and Native Companion have internalized their oppression as well. Native Companion seems to take the attitudes of her harassers—who “look at [her] like she’s food, which she ignores”\textsuperscript{13}—for granted. She minimizes the egregiousness of her harassers’ behaviour and insists that the only thing to do is ignore these men. She has, it seems, accepted the inevitability of being treated like she’s a piece of meat. This would seem to indicate that, despite her feistiness, Native Companion has internalized the gendered sexual roles of dominance and submission that many feminists criticize. And, while many of the Pirzada women have complaints about many aspects of purdah and veiling, many of them also defend these practices. Some of their defences appeal to reasons that are ultimately probably unproblematic, such as the significance of these practices as markers of their ethnic and religious identity. But other of their defences, such as the concern about being thought to be immodest were one to be seen in public without a burqua, indicate that these women have internalized sexist social mores.

I contend that each of these women’s behaviour is morally problematic because they have accepted their fates and failed to resist their oppression. This failure to resist is in some way tied to these women having internalized different sexist social mores. Native Companion believes that men are just naturally sexually aggressive and that the only appropriate response to this aggressiveness is to do nothing; the Bengali women believe that men are more deserving of food and other basic goods than are women; the Ultimate Bride believes that women are responsible for childrearing in a way that men are not and that she

\textsuperscript{13} Wallace, 97.
can do more good by being a stay-at-home mother than by using her talents and education in the public sphere; the Pirzada women believe that women’s modesty is more important than their independence. These women’s beliefs about their relative status, temperament, and role vis-à-vis the men in their lives are sexist. And these beliefs are at least partially causally responsible for their acceptance of their oppression.

Of course, I’m merely speculating that these women hold these sexist beliefs. It is possible that someone could be in a situation analogous to one of these four cases and not have internalized her oppression, and so it is possible that she would hold no such beliefs. But, given that at least some oppressed people do internalize their oppression in this way—and, as we’ll see, this is phenomenon is so ubiquitous that most people internalize at least some aspects of their oppression—this speculation is neither unreasonable nor unrealistic. There is a philosophical issue here, I contend, regardless of whether my speculations are right in these particular cases.

My argument begins in Chapter 2, where I give an analysis of the harms of oppression. Someone is oppressed, I argue when (i) she is unjustly harmed in a group-specific way, and (ii) this harm is part of a structural and systemic network of social institutions. The bulk of this chapter is synthetic: while the precise formulation of this account of oppression is my own, I take this account to be a synthesis of ideas about oppression taken from philosophers as far back as J.S. Mill. What’s most novel in this chapter is my account of how oppression can damage the rational nature of those who are oppressed. This harm can happen in a number of ways: it can prevent oppressed people from being able to figure out how to get what they want, it can prevent oppressed people from wanting certain valuable things in the first place, or it can cause them to act in a variety of practically irrational ways. Self-harming akrasia, self-deception with practical
consequences, various other forms of illogical practical deliberation: engaging in these sorts of practically irrational behaviours, I argue, is evidence that oppression has harmed one’s rational capacity to set and pursue ends.

As we’ll see, oppression limits not only oppressed people’s capacity to reason instrumentally—that is, to determine how to pursue the ends they have already set—but, also, their capacity to set ends in the first place. This is because oppressive social conditions can limit people’s exposure to possible forms of life that, were they exposed to them, they might decide were valuable. When someone’s experiences are constrained, this can constrain her sense of what is possible for people like her. Native Companion’s rational capacities are limited by oppression insofar as she cannot imagine what it would be like to not have to deal with men’s predatory sexuality. The Pirzada women’s rational capacities are limited by their oppression because it both limits their access to educational opportunities that would develop their capacity to use means-ends reasoning and constrains their sense of what ends it is possible for them to set for themselves. The Ultimate Bride’s rational capacities are limited by oppression insofar as sexist social norms prevent her from seeing that she should not have to make sacrifices that her husband does not. And the Bengali women’s rational capacities are limited by their oppression because their internalized sense of inferiority prevents them setting the right ends: it prevents them from understanding that they have a right to have their lives go better than they are.

These women acquiesce in their oppression, even though it harms their rational capacities. I think that these women’s failure to resist their oppression is a moral failing. I argue that people who are oppressed like this have an obligation not to acquiesce in their oppression. This means that each of these women has an obligation to act otherwise.
This is, in effect, the main argument of this dissertation, which is found primarily in Chapter 3. I argue there that people whose rational nature is threatened by oppression have an obligation to resist their oppression. This obligation is, I argue, an instance of a larger species of obligation: namely, to respect some morally important feature, or features, of persons. In particular, I argue that women have an obligation to resist sexist oppression. To establish this, after having shown in Chapter 2 how oppression can undermine the rational nature of the oppressed, in Chapter 3 I give an account of the general obligation to respect rational nature. I then argue that, insofar as oppression has this effect on one’s rational nature, one is obligated to resist one’s oppression. This is an obligation to respect certain morally valuable aspects of one’s moral agency that are undermined by oppression.

One thing I explore at length in Chapter 3 is that the usual reason to think that someone’s acquiescence in her or his oppression is morally problematic is other-oriented. By acquiescing in oppression, one might argue, someone is at least failing to help, and quite possibly actually harming, other people. This idea has merit. After all, no one is oppressed in a social vacuum. The extent to which an individual goes along with her own oppression typically affects the oppression of others who share her social category. Simply put, accepting one’s oppression can make oppression appear acceptable. And making oppression appear acceptable is no better than endorsing it: sending the message that it’s permissible to

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14 For example, as we’ll see in Chapters 3 and 5, Ann Cudd argues that what is wrong when women acquiesce in their own oppression is that doing so strengthens sexist institutions that harm all women. But Cudd resists the conclusion that the oppressed have a general obligation to resist their own oppression; she argues that in many cases resisting one’s oppression is supererogatory. The only time someone who is oppressed does have an obligation to resist her oppression, Cudd thinks, is when she has chosen to acquiesce in her oppression and this acquiescence harms other members of her oppressed group. See Ann Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 198-200.
oppress me in virtue of my being a woman sends the message that it’s permissible to oppress others in virtue of their being women, too.

In each of the four cases we are considering, these women’s actions affect other women because the various forms of oppression they fail to resist are phenomena that simultaneously draw on and reinforce oppressive sexist social norms. The norms behind Native Companion’s sexual harassment include beliefs about women’s inferiority to men and about the appropriateness and permissibility of men’s sexual aggressiveness and women’s sexual passivity. The norms behind the Bengali women’s adaptive preferences to allow themselves to starve include beliefs about women’s relative inferiority to men. The norms behind the Ultimate Bride’s bending to social pressures to opt out of the work force include beliefs about women’s proper place being in the home and about the relative lack of importance of women’s careers. The norms behind the Pirzada women’s seclusion and veiling include beliefs about the importance of women’s modesty and the unimportance of women’s independence. When these women acquiesce in their oppression, they simultaneously entrench this oppression by participating in, and thereby reinforcing, certain sexist attitudes and social norms, which, in turn, reinforce the sexist oppression that harms all women. So these women’s failure to resist their oppression indirectly harms all other women. Because the choice to acquiesce in one’s own oppression negatively affects the life prospects of others, these sorts of cases of acquiescing in one’s oppression are morally wrong. Thus, we can say that oppressed people have an obligation to resist their own oppression insofar as failing to do otherwise harms others. According to this argument, the obligation to resist one’s own oppression is an obligation one has to others, not an obligation one has to oneself.
But there’s also a self-directed account of the obligation to resist one’s oppression, I’ll argue. Someone who is oppressed should stick up for herself, you might think, because, by acquiescing in her oppression, she’s behaving in a way that is wrong regardless of how others are affected. To bolster this thought, I turn to Kant. While I’ll be arguing inside a broadly Kantian framework, I don’t intend to defend this framework. Instead, I’ll take the framework itself for granted, and use it to articulate and defend what I hope is a compelling view of the moral importance of our rational nature and the attendant obligations we have toward it. Still, because I think that following Kant closely is essential to achieving this goal, Chapters 3 through 5 contain a significant amount of interpretive work.

It is a well-known feature of Kant’s practical philosophy that he argues for obligations to the self as well as to others. Kant has been highly influential on this point; most contemporary philosophers who write about obligations to the self do so within the Kantian tradition. Kant’s case for our obligations to ourselves, like his case for our obligations to others, begins with the value of our rational nature. Kant’s argument for why rational nature in general is valuable relies on his second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, also known as the Formula of Humanity. This formulation of the Categorical Imperative famously commands you to “Act so that you use humanity in your own person, as well as in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a

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means” \((G 4:429)\). The ground, or explanatory justification, of this moral principle, according to Kant, is that “[r]ational nature exists as an end in itself” \((G 4:429)\).\(^{16}\)

Kant says that insofar as we are rational we must conceive of ourselves as having a rational nature, and we must recognize that our rational nature confers upon us a value that requires that we always be treated as an end and never merely as a means. That is, insofar as we are rational we must view this rational nature as conferring on us a value that restricts the ways we may be treated. The obligation of self-respect, then, is an obligation to recognize the value of the rational nature within us and to respond accordingly. This obligation is an instance of the more general obligation to respect rational nature wherever one finds it.

Now, as it happens, I actually agree with accounts that argue that part of the source of the obligation to resist one’s own oppression is that doing so (or failing to do so) affects others in one’s social group. But, unlike these accounts, my account emphasizes that, in addition to obligations one has to others, one has an obligation to oneself. As we’ll see in Chapter 3, one important reason for insisting that there is also an obligation to the self here is that doing so solves a problem that can’t be solved if the obligation to resist one’s oppression is merely an obligation to others: specifically, identifying what is wrong with servility or certain gendered norms of self-sacrifice.

The problems of servility are more evident in some of our four cases than in others. I think it’s not clear whether the oppressive harms undergone by Native Companion include this kind of servility. But the Bengali women are so servile that they’re willing to sacrifice their interests to the point of starvation. And the Ultimate Bride sacrifices her own education, talents, and prospects in favour of her husband’s aspirations and her child’s

needs. And the Pirzada women sacrifice their independence in favour of the economic interests and group identity of their community. Condemning the exploitation of women that results from gendered norms of self-sacrifice requires ruling out the possibility that one could be obligated to sacrifice one’s own rational capacities, or allow oneself to be oppressed, to increase or preserve the rational capacities of others. And it is only if the obligation to respect one’s own rational nature is at least as important as the obligation to respect others’ rational nature that we can rule out the permissibility of this exploitation in all cases. Thus, I’ll argue, the obligation to resist one’s oppression must be, at least in part, an obligation to the self.

Some might find it surprising, given the explicitly feminist focus of this project, that I use a Kantian framework to analyze obligations under oppression. Kant is usually held up as a philosopher whose personal views are particularly unfriendly to women and whose theoretical framework is fundamentally inimical to feminism. In an Interlude between Chapters 3 and 4, I consider what I take to be the most pressing feminist objections to Kant’s views, and I conclude that while Kant himself was clearly no feminist, there is nothing preventing a Kantian from using his moral theory for feminist purposes. In fact, I argue, if we reject Kantianism we risk losing sight of some of the worst harms that can result from oppression, and we risk losing strategies to ameliorate these harms that only the Kantian framework can suggest.

In the final two chapters, I deal with various other concerns. These include the objection, introduced in Chapter 4, that failing to fulfill this obligation might vitiate future instances of this obligation. The thought here is that if oppression harms rational nature, and if the value of rational nature is what grounds the obligation to resist oppression, then a person whose rational nature has been harmed by oppression will at some point no longer
be obligated to resist it. Another way to think about this problem is that because someone who fails to fulfill the objection to resist her oppression has behaved immorally, and because it is someone’s moral agency that gives her the sort of value that makes her worthy of moral respect, then being immoral might affect her respect-worthiness. And if someone is not worthy of respect, then it looks like she has no obligation to respect herself, and thus no obligation to resist her oppression. Native Companion’s failure to confront the men who sexually harass her; the Bengali women’s failure to demand an equal share of the limited resources available to them; the Ultimate Bride’s failure to insist that her career should not have to be sacrificed; the Pirzada women’s failure to protest their lack of independence—these failures to resist oppression could, in conjunction with other similar failures to resist, eventually vitiate these people’s obligation to resist their oppression.

Were conclusions like these necessarily to follow from my analysis this would, I admit, be reason to reject it. Luckily, we need not accept these unintuitive results. I show why this is the case in Chapter 4 by defending a novel interpretation of Kant’s views on the relation between the value we have and the respect we are owed. I argue, contra the received view among Kant scholars, that the feature in virtue of which someone has intrinsic value is not the same feature in virtue of which she is owed the respect that constrains how she may be treated (by herself or others). So, even though someone who fails to resist her own oppression fails to respect herself in the right way, and even though this moral failing does make her lose a certain kind of value, her obligations to respect herself and to resist her oppression do not go away.

A final objection to my account that I consider is the claim that, were the obligation to resist one’s oppression to exist, it would be far too demanding. The objection is the subject of Chapter 5. Given the ubiquity of oppression and the resilience of the systems that
produce it, it looks like an obligation to resist one’s own oppression must be very demanding. If the obligation to resist one’s own oppression were to require someone to do whatever it takes to neutralize or dismantle the systems that produce her oppression every time she faced an oppressive harm, one might argue that this obligation would be too onerous. If Native Companion were obligated to confront men who sexually harassed her every time it happened, she would probably find herself with very little time for anything else in her life. If the Bengali women were obligated to demand complete equality and a fair share of the limited food available to them, they might risk violence at the hands of those who did not think they deserved this equality. If the Ultimate Bride were obligated to demand that her career be as high a priority as her husband’s, she might very well have to sacrifice her relationship with the man she loves. If the Pirzada women were obligated to refuse to seclude or veil themselves, they would almost certainly be ostracised from their community. In each of these cases, we might think that oppressive social factors have left these women with enough on their plates and that the last thing they need is to be answerable to further moral demands.

I respond to this line of objection in Chapter 5 by defending a particular account of the obligation to resist one’s oppression according to which it is often satisfiable by more than one action. This means that someone isn’t obligated to do whatever it takes to neutralize or dismantle the systems that oppress her; and she isn’t obligated to resist oppression every time she is oppressed either. The degree of latitude in action afforded by this obligation will depend on a number of factors, including the severity of one’s oppression, the risks one would face by resisting this oppression, the likelihood of one’s resistance making a difference to the overarching oppressive social conditions, and so on. Thus, according to this account, Native Companion would be obligated to confront some,
but not all, of the men who sexually harass her, and she would not necessarily be obligated
to confront any of these men directly. The Bengali women would be obligated to do at least
as much as similarly situated men would to prevent themselves from starving to death. The
Ultimate Bride would be obligated to insist that her career was as much a priority as her
husband’s but would be permitted to make compromises as long as her husband was willing
to make similar ones. The Pirzada women would be obligated to do what they could to fight
the inhibiting effects of the practices of veiling and purdah but not at the expense of
alienating themselves from their community. This is not to deny that the obligation to resist
one’s oppression requires a lot from those who are already burdened by oppression, but it is
to say that this obligation needn’t necessarily be so onerous that it is unrealistic to expect
people to ever fulfill it.

Thinking about the obligation to resist one’s own oppression in this way—as an
obligation that can be fulfilled by more than one kind of action—makes the obligation what
Kantians call an imperfect duty. The distinguishing characteristic of imperfect duties is that
they permit a wider range of acceptable actions in fulfilling them than is the case for perfect
duties. This is because (unlike perfect duties) imperfect duties are not, strictly speaking,
duties to perform specific actions. Rather, imperfect duties are duties to adopt certain general
maxims, or, in other words, principles of action. These maxims can be satisfied by more than
one action. Imperfect duties thus allow a latitude of choice that perfect duties do not. To
say that the duty to resist one’s oppression is imperfect, however, is not to suggest that it is
less stringent or less important than other duties. Instead, calling this duty imperfect means
that there is a strict duty to set the end of resisting one’s own oppression, but there can be
more than one way to go about pursuing this end. What the imperfect duty to resist one’s
oppression rules out is the refusal to do anything to resist one’s oppression. That is, it rules out the permissibility of acquiescing in one’s own oppression.

To recap: my intent here is to show that oppressed people have an obligation to resist their oppression. I’ll do this by first showing how the systemic harms of oppression can damage people’s rational natures, and then by appealing to the Kantian tenet that says that the fundamental moral importance of our rational nature means we have an obligation to protect it from harm. And so, I’ll argue, under oppressive social circumstances the obligation to protect our rational nature translates into an obligation to resist oppression.
ANALYZING OPPRESSION: A DEFINITION OF OPPRESSION

What, exactly, is oppression? What sorts of harms count as oppressive harms? While I mean my theory of oppression to capture many ordinary uses of the word, the word ‘oppression’ can be used to refer to a number of very different kinds of harms and I don’t pretend to capture all of them under my theory. (As it happens, I don’t think any one account could account for every use of the word.) If the sort of harm the characters of Monty Python have in mind when they exclaim, “Don’t you oppress me!” is precisely the same sort of harm we’re interested in, we risk trivializing the harms in question. Less frivolously, if justly incarcerated prisoners or privileged rich white men faced with a bit of bad luck count as oppressed in the sense we’re interested in, we risk not being able to capture what is unique about the specific harms I’m attempting to pick out. ‘Oppression,’ as I’ll be using the word, is ultimately a piece of jargon.

I want to stipulate, then, that we reserve the word ‘oppression’ to refer to a specific class of group-specific harms. As we’ll see, my account of oppression borrows heavily from the literature, but its precise formulation is mine. The account of oppression I defend here has two conditions; these conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient. An individual is oppressed, I contend, if and only if
(i) she is unjustly harmed in a group-specific way, where this sort of harm has occurred if and only if
   a. she is harmed in virtue of being a member of a group, G; and,
   b. on balance, members of G have a relative lack of social esteem, power, or authority; and,
   c. on balance, members of another group, G*, benefit from her being harmed; and,
   d. this harm is unfair, unearned, or illegitimate in some other way;

and,

(ii) this harm is part of a structural and systemic network of social institutions.

Unlike non-oppressive harms, oppressive harms are directed at individuals in virtue of their membership in a group of people (and not every group of people will count as one whose members can be subject to oppression). This means that, for example, when in a case of oppression a woman is picked out as an individual who deserves harmful treatment, this treatment is directed at her, not solely as an individual with particular handicaps or failures, but also as a member of a group—the group comprised of all women—whose members are considered collectively deserving of such treatment. Because oppressive harms come about as a result of judgements that concern the qualities that all members of a group are presumed to share, or that concern what such people are presumed to deserve, a harm counts as an instance of oppression only if it results from the recognition that the individual in question is a member of a certain group or category of people. I consider this first condition, that oppressive harms apply in virtue of group membership, in more detail below.
Also, unlike non-oppressive harms, which are more often the result of the intentional actions of a few people, or perhaps the result of a few isolated social policies, oppressive harms are more often the unintentional result of certain social norms and assumptions, the legitimacy of which typically goes unquestioned. Because of the role of these publicly shared assumptions, oppressive harms are rarely fully explainable by appealing solely to the actions or intentions of the particular person or the particular policy that might be directly responsible for them. In other words, oppressive harms are *structural* and *systemic*. I consider this second condition of oppression in more detail below as well.

After looking briefly at some historical precedents to my account of oppression, I end this chapter by focusing on a particular kind of oppressive harm, specifically, harms to oppressed people’s rational natures. This is what I take to be most novel about my analysis of oppression: my account of how oppression can damage the rational nature of those who are oppressed.

**Unjust Group-Specific Harm**

The four-pronged first condition of oppression has to do with how one becomes a candidate for being subject to oppressive harms. Someone who is oppressed undergoes an unjust harm to which she is subject in virtue of her membership in a group or category of people. An individual is harmed in this group-specific way, I argue, if and only if

a. she is harmed in virtue of being a member of a group, G; and,

b. on balance, members of G have a relative lack of social esteem, power, or authority; and,
c. on balance, members of another group, $G^*$, benefit from her being harmed; and,

d. this harm is unfair, unearned, or illegitimate in some other way.

Being harmed in virtue of one’s membership in a group can happen in a number of ways. In some cases, people can pick someone out for some harmful treatment for the consciously accessible reason that she belongs to $G$. In other cases, whatever consciously accessible reasons people have for treating someone in this way, the best psychological explanation for why they do so is that they are responding to her membership in $G$ as the salient feature about her.

But remember, I mentioned above that the harms of oppression are, very commonly, not the result of the intentional actions of a single agent. We’ll consider some other implications of this point in more detail in the next section, but for now notice what this means for the sense in which an oppressed person is “picked out” for harmful treatment in virtue of her membership in a social group. The language of “picking out” implies that there is an individual who does this picking; but in many of the most common cases of oppression this is not how things work. Sally Haslanger explains how this works.

In the context of oppression, certain properties of individuals are socially meaningful. This is to say that the properties play a role in a broadly accepted (though usually not fully explicit) representation of the world that functions to justify and motivate particular forms of social intercourse. The significant properties in question—in the cases at hand, assumed or actual properties of the body—mark you ‘for application of oppressive pressures’ insofar as the attribution of these properties is interpreted as adequate, in light of this background representation, to explain and/or justify your social position in a structure of oppressive social relations. In the case of women, the idea is that societies are guided by representations that link being female with other facts that have implications for how one should be viewed and treated; insofar as we structure our social life to accommodate the cultural
meanings of the female (and male) body, females occupy an oppressed social position.¹

When an oppressed person is harmed in virtue of being a member of a group, it’s not usually the case that this harm is the result of an individual saying to himself, “Ah, she’s a member of the social group comprised of women! People who are women deserve to be treated in this harmful way!” This, of course, does happen sometimes. But in the more usual case, oppressive harms are not the result of the intentional actions of an individual person. Instead, they’re usually the unintentional result of an interrelated system of social norms and institutions. This theoretical point also has a practical upshot: it means that it is often inappropriate to straightforwardly blame individual members of oppressive groups for what is really a larger social phenomenon. We’ll see how this works in more detail below.

Because oppression is, fundamentally, a form of injustice that concerns groups, individual people are oppressed if and only if they are subject to injustice because they are members of a particular group. Sexist oppression harms people, then, in virtue of the fact that they are (or appear to be) women. Racist oppression harms people in virtue of the fact that they are (or appear to be) members of a particular race. And so on. But it needs to be asked what kind of group of people we’re talking about here. Do oppressed groups share certain specific features in virtue of their oppression? Iris Marion Young has argued that the wide range of social and historical contexts in which the members of different oppressed groups live means it is not possible to come up with a single set of criteria capable of accounting for all the different conditions of oppression. She argues instead that different

forms of oppression share only a family resemblance. While I think Young is right to avoid an overly narrow definition of oppression—lest the account leave out some groups that should count as oppressed or leave out some of the ways that members of different groups are oppressed—there is reason to be wary of an account of oppression being too nonspecific. After all, if a definition ends up including as oppressed groups that we don’t intuitively think should count as oppressed, we risk not taking completely seriously the ways in which the harms of oppression are uniquely damaging. As I said above, we’re not talking about the Monty Python sort of oppression here. Taking account of the many different ways that oppression can be manifested is important, but it’s also important that the concept not be diluted to the point where a charge of oppression carries little normative weight.

Also, I think there simply is more that can be said about the commonalities between different kinds of oppressed groups. This is where the second subcondition of this condition of oppression comes in: one characteristic that is shared by all oppressed groups is the relative lack of social esteem that is accorded to these groups. The Bengali women from Chapter I, for example, lived in a society where their interests were widely seen as not as important as men’s. This lack of social esteem means that the members of groups that are oppressed, such as the Bengali women, have less power and less authority than the rest of people in society. Oppressed people are more likely to be both politically disenfranchised (by, say, being forbidden or discouraged from voting or holding political office) and economically disenfranchised (by, say, being forbidden or discouraged from working or by having restricted access to the best jobs).

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2 Young does, however, admit that at the most abstract level there are some experiences shared by all oppressed people. Specifically, she claims that oppressed people experience an “inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings.” See Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 40.
These disparities in esteem, power, and authority result, not only in many unfair restrictions on the members of groups that are oppressed, but also in correspondingly unearned privileges for the members of groups that are not oppressed. Many of these restrictions and privileges are readily apparent. But, due to the systemic nature of oppression, which we’ll look more closely at below, some of these unfair restrictions and privileges aren’t even recognized as such.

To count as oppressive, the harms faced by the members of oppressed groups must also, on balance, serve the interests of the members of another group. This is the third subcondition of this condition of oppression: the members of another group must ultimately benefit from the harms experienced by the members of an oppressed group for these harms to be instances of oppression. This condition might seem strange, until one realizes that relative advantage can count as a benefit. If members of one group face systematic hardships that members of a second group do not, then members of the second group will be in a better position than members of the first group to compete for limited resources. Not having to compete on fair terms with members of oppressed groups is thus an unearned privilege that members of non-oppressed groups benefit from.

Another, more concrete example of this kind of relative advantage is the benefits that accrue to men as a result of women’s disproportionate risk of being subject to sexual violence. This disproportionate risk results in a “male protection racket,” whereby men in general benefit from the immoral actions of a specific few men who actually assault
women. The climate of fear of sexual violence against women gives men an opportunity to benefit from being seen as “nice guys”—by walking a woman to her car late at night, for example—because women feel vulnerable and dependent. Men also benefit from women’s disproportionate risk of sexual violence because it effectively reduces women’s competition with them for certain jobs. These sorts of harms that women undergo as members of a group count as oppressive because the existence of these harms ultimately serves the interests of men as a group.

This third condition follows straightforwardly from the condition we just looked at: that members of oppressed groups have a relative lack of social esteem, power, and authority. As we’ll see in more detail below, this means that oppressed people are likelier than non-oppressed people to be economically disenfranchised (either because they are not permitted to own property or, more frequently in current times, because they are able to earn less money, on average, than non-oppressed people). It also means that they’re likelier than non-oppressed people to be politically disenfranchised (either because they have restricted access to voting or, more frequently in current times, because they are less likely to hold positions of political power and influence, either in politics proper or the business world more generally).

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3 Thanks to Louise Antony for suggesting this point. For more on the idea of the male protection racket, see, e.g., Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975).

4 This is, of course, not to suggest that men who walk women to their cars late at night, or do whatever else they can to make women feel safe, are in some way intending to exploit women. Nor is it to suggest that men should not do these things. It’s just to point out that the opportunities men have to perform these courtesies both result from and ultimately help strengthen oppressive structures that systematically benefit men at women’s expense.
This condition rules out the possibility that everyone is equally oppressed. The harms of oppression are not inevitabilities like aging, disease, or death; oppression is not a necessary aspect of the human condition.

This condition also explains why many of the harms members of non-oppressed groups experience in virtue of their membership in a group don’t count as instances of oppression—because these harms ultimately don’t benefit the members of oppressed groups. So, for example, Marilyn Frye has argued that, when a white person is unable safely to walk the streets of a racial ghetto, this restriction on his or her agency isn’t an oppressive one, because ultimately the ghetto benefits white people at the expense of those who are ghettoized. Its purpose is to keep non-white people in its borders; that it also functions to keep white people out might indeed be a harm that white people must endure, but being made to endure this harm isn’t a case of oppression because it doesn’t on balance benefit those in the ghetto. (Also, as we’ll see below, white people aren’t oppressed by the ghetto because they’re not subject to the many other harms and restrictions experienced by residents of the ghetto that are systematically related to the restrictions that are directly imposed by the ghetto.)

Another example of a harm that doesn’t count as oppressive because its existence doesn’t benefit the members of another group is the harm an individual man might undergo when chivalry’s “women and children first” rule meant he got saved last (if at all). This harm isn’t oppressive because, at least in its current incarnation, the institution of chivalry is part of a system of social norms that, on balance, benefits men at the expense of women rather

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5 Thanks to Tim Schroeder for pointing this out.

than the other way around. On their own, individual chivalrous actions—things like holding a door open for a woman—are usually purported to be gestures of helpfulness, politeness, and respect. But really, gallant gestures like this have little practical upshot. Women don’t usually need men to hold doors open for them; they’re perfectly capable of opening doors for themselves. What women do need is men who are willing to do what it takes actually to improve women’s life prospects. Women need men who are willing to fight patriarchy, men who are willing to consider giving up the privileges they have received unfairly in virtue of their gender. When you give someone something she doesn’t need and refuse to give her something she does need, the helpfulness of your gesture couldn’t ring more hollow.

Whatever small benefits women might get from chivalry are outweighed by its overall negative effect: women would, on balance, be better off without this institution. Chivalrous gestures generally serve little practical purpose; rather, their purpose is a symbolic one. These actions can send the message that women are incapable and helpless: their function can be to entrench harmful stereotypes about women’s nature.  

On the whole, then, the institution of chivalry oppresses women; it doesn’t help them. In some extreme situations—lifeboat situations, really—individual women might actually stand to benefit from the institution of chivalry, and individual men might stand to be harmed by it. But, in general, the take-home message behind the institution of chivalry is not one of respect for women. And trivial courtesies in place of the real social action that is necessary to actually improve women’s lives is nothing so much as lipstick on a pig. So, while being more likely to be the last to be rescued (or not rescued at all) in certain situations is clearly a harm, this harm

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7 None of this is to say that I think men shouldn’t hold doors open for women. They just need to do it for the right reasons. Holding a door open for someone if you’ve gotten there first seems like a perfectly polite thing to do. But then you’d better be willing to have the door held open for you as well. And you’d better be willing to open the door for men too.
doesn’t count as oppressive given the ‘on balance’ requirement of the third condition. Oppression is a particular kind of harm; and, just because a harm isn’t oppressive, this doesn’t mean that it can’t be harmful in some other way.

Another example of a harm that doesn’t count as oppressive because it doesn’t, on balance, benefit the members of one group at the expense of another has to do with legal precedents that award the custody of children disproportionately to women. Some critics have charged that because men can sometimes be harmed by some of the institutions of patriarchy—such as custody decisions in family law—men are, in this sense, oppressed. This sort of harm certainly shares many features with other oppressive harms. An individual man is harmed by the custody precedents in family law because he is picked out as a member of a group. It might even be that it’s not just individual men who are sometimes harmed by this institution, but that men in general tend to be systematically harmed in similar ways by this institution. But I still don’t want to concede that this harm counts as oppressive.

This is because, on balance, patriarchy benefits men at the expense of women. Even if a particular institution of patriarchy, such as the precedents of family law, systematically confers some benefits to women at the expense of men, on the whole this institution is part of a much larger network of formal and informal social institutions that systematically benefit men, not women. Women’s being awarded the custody of their children in these disputes can be traced, in large part, to the widely held sexist belief that women are more naturally suited to raise children than men; this belief, in conjunction with a whole host of other sexist

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beliefs about the natures of, abilities of, and appropriate social roles for men and women and in conjunction with sexist social institutions that reflect and perpetuate these beliefs, on balance disadvantages women and benefits men. Furthermore, it’s not straightforwardly clear whether being awarded the custody of their children counts, on balance, as an unambiguous benefit for women. After divorce, women’s standard of living decreases markedly and men’s standard of living increases markedly: this is due in part to the costs and lack of job flexibility associated with the responsibilities of raising children. So, while not being awarded the custody of their children is clearly a harm to the men who would like to be able to raise their children, this harm is not an oppressive one. On balance, men still benefit from sexist social institutions such as this one.

We’ve just seen that the harms faced by the members of oppressed groups must, on balance, both serve the interests of the members of another group and derive from a relative lack of social esteem and a resulting lack of power and authority for these harms to count as oppressive. But it’s worth noticing that there are some situations where the members of one group benefit from the harms experienced by the members of another group, and where the members of the latter group suffer from a relative lack of social esteem that results in a lack of power and authority, and yet these harms do not count as instances of oppression. For example, the systematic restrictions that prisoners face serve the interests of another group—the group consisting of law-abiding members of society at large. And prisoners make up a group of people that is generally looked down upon by society at large, and this relative lack of social esteem results in a lack of power and authority. Were meeting either of these two conditions not merely necessary but also sufficient for someone counting as oppressed, then prisoners would count as oppressed.
But surely it’s uncontentious to assume that a theory of just punishment can account for at least some restrictions on prisoners’ agency at least some of the time. When prisoners have earned the restrictions on their agency, these restrictions are legitimate and therefore, I contend, not oppressive. The legitimacy of a harm—in this case, because it is deserved—should, intuitively, rule out the possibility of it being oppressive. This means that both facing harms that serve the interests of another group, and facing a lack of social status and a resulting lack of power and authority, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for someone to count as oppressed.

This point leads us to the final necessary subcondition of our definition of oppression: an oppressive harm or restriction must be unfair, unearned, or illegitimate in some other way. Harms that are deserved (say, because they are the result of just punishment) are not oppressive. As we’ve just seen, prisoners, for example, are harmed in virtue of their membership in a group but they don’t count as oppressed just in virtue of their imprisonment. Assuming that a prisoner’s incarceration is just, he or she has earned the restrictions on his or her agency and so he or she deserves this harm. And restrictions count as unfair, usually, only when they are undeserved or unearned. Only when a harm or restriction is unfair, then, is it a candidate for being an oppressive harm.

To recap: the first condition of our definition of oppression tells us that someone is oppressed only if she has undergone an unjust harm to which she is subject in virtue of her

9 An exception to this might be, for example, certain privileges or restrictions that, as a matter of good or bad luck, result from a person’s physical characteristics. A tall person has an easier time reaching something off a high shelf; a shorter person has an easier time fitting comfortably into an airplane seat. These sorts of restrictions and privileges aren’t really deserved (in the sense that one hasn’t done anything to earn them), but they’re not unfair.

I don’t take the existence of these sorts of exceptions to undermine the general egalitarian point here, that undeserved restrictions and unearned privileges are usually unfair.

Thanks to Sigrún Svavarsdóttir for pointing out to me the possibility of such exceptions.
membership in a group or category of people. More specifically, an individual is harmed in this group-specific way if and only if (a) she is harmed in virtue of being a member of a group, G; (b) on balance, members of G have a relative lack of social esteem, power, or authority; (c) on balance, members of another group, G*, benefit from her being harmed; and, (d) this harm is unfair, unearned, or illegitimate in some other way. These four subconditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for an individual to count as harmed in this group-specific way.

STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC HARM

The second condition of our definition of oppression is that oppressive harms are part of a structural and systemic network of social institutions. The systematicity of oppression has been most famously explained by Marilyn Frye, who illustrates the systematic nature of sexist oppression with an analogy to a birdcage. Frye points out that, if you only ever look at a birdcage one wire at a time, you will never see how such a structure could limit the mobility of its occupant. You will just assume that the bird could pick itself up, dust itself off, and fly around the wire in its way. But, if you were to step back and look at all of the wires of a birdcage together, you would see an interconnected system of barriers that function collectively to restrict the bird’s freedom. Analogously, it can be hard to recognize people’s oppression if you focus exclusively on any particular social, political, or economic institution or even if you focus exclusively on any particular restriction or frustration or instance of harm. Taken by themselves, these sorts of things can seem innocuous—not really capable of limiting someone’s freedom in terribly profound or important ways. You will just assume

that any given person should be able to pick herself up, dust herself off, and get on with her life in just the way anyone unlucky enough to be faced with a random setback would. Frye’s metaphor suggests that it’s only when you step back and look at the system of social, political, and economic institutions as a whole that you can see how it functions to oppress people.

Oppression thus needs to be understood from a macroscopic point of view, taking into account how economic, political, social, and psychological factors function in concert to negatively affect the life prospects of members of oppressed groups. This explains why oppressive harms can be overlooked—or explained away as individual slights or innocuous inconveniences or minor annoyances—unless we are careful to pay attention to the ways that these harms function systematically. That oppression is systemic means that the detrimental effects of oppression are usually only fully evident from a perspective that takes their effects on a person’s life prospects into account all at once.

Because it is perpetuated primarily through social institutions, rather than the isolated actions of individual agents, a common (though not necessary) feature of oppression is that its harms are very often invisible and unintentional. Young describes this characteristic of oppression in terms of “the vast and deep injustices [members of] some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life.” The systematicity of oppression means that an oppressive harm need not be intended to be oppressive in order to be oppressive nor, even, need it be intended as a harm: the norms and

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11 Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, 41.
assumptions responsible for the creation and maintenance of the institutions that are oppressive in societies like ours—instutions like the workplace, the family, the academy, religion, popular culture, and the media—very often function far beneath the level of the conscious intentions of the people taking part in these institutions. Oppression is thus fundamentally a social phenomenon that doesn’t require individual people as oppressors. To be sure, oppression can take place when one individual person intentionally performs an action that harms another. But this is not the only, nor even the most common, kind of oppressive harm. Most oppressive harms tend not to be the result of the intentional actions of an individual person, but are more often the unintentional result of an interrelated system of social norms and institutions. The existence of this latter kind of oppression means that even if everyone were well-intentioned people could still be oppressed because many of the structural barriers of oppression function below the level of what people consciously intend.

Oppression affects people in a number of very different ways. And these effects are related to each other in systematic ways. There are economic, political, social, and psychological components to oppression, all of which are interrelated.

The economic component of oppression is that people who are oppressed are economically disenfranchised. Historically (and currently, in some countries), this has meant that people who were oppressed were not permitted to own property. Currently, this means that people who are oppressed, on average, earn less money than non-oppressed people.


The political component of oppression is that people who are oppressed are politically disenfranchised. Historically (and currently, in some countries), this has meant that people who were oppressed were not permitted to vote.\textsuperscript{14} Currently, this means that people who are oppressed tend not to occupy positions of political power and influence, either in politics proper or in the business world more generally.\textsuperscript{15}

The social component of oppression is that the harms of oppression run much deeper than mere economic and political inequality. Some of the most powerful mechanisms of oppression are also the most mundane, because they have to do with ubiquitous social norms and roles the legitimacy of which is often taken for granted. These social norms and roles define different standards of appropriateness for both oppressed and non-oppressed people for everything from behaviours and mannerisms to aspirations, values, interests, and terms of success. These social norms and roles function in concert to determine what it is possible for people to achieve, and the possibilities for people who are oppressed are much worse than they are for people who are not oppressed.

The psychological component of oppression refers to the fact that the effects of oppression affect the inner lives of people who are oppressed. The psychological effects of oppression range from fear and trauma to humiliation, shame, and low self-esteem. Each of

\begin{itemize}
\item Women were not granted the right to vote in Canada until 1917, and not until 1920 in the United States. African Americans were granted the right to vote in the United States in 1870, but this was not enforced in all states until 1964. Aboriginal people were not granted the right to vote in Canada until 1960.
\end{itemize}
these effects harm people who are oppressed by depriving them of the psychological means necessary to compete with those who are not oppressed and to protect themselves from further harm. Another psychological effect of oppression is that people who are oppressed often internalize their oppression in various ways. Internalized oppression makes it easier to oppress people and can make this oppression appear natural.

The structural and systemic nature of oppression means that each of these components of oppression—the economic, political, social, and psychological components—interacts with the others to harm people who are oppressed.

THE HISTORICAL BASIS FOR THIS ACCOUNT OF OPPRESSION

While the precise formulation of the account of oppression just laid out is my own, I take this account to be a synthesis of ideas about oppression taken from philosophers as far back as J.S. Mill. Almost 150 years ago, in his 1869 *The Subjection of Women*, J.S. Mill articulated one of the first liberal theories of oppression. According to this theory, oppression is a denial of equal liberty, which, for Mill, is tantamount to a denial of the opportunity to develop one’s rational capacities for thought and action. Mill’s central concern in *The Subjection of Women* was to establish that “the legal subordination of one sex to the other … is wrong in

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17 In the appendix at the end of this dissertation, I apply this account to a particular case of oppression: the sexual division of domestic labour. While in many ways not the most extreme example of sexist oppression, the complexity of this issue is useful for demonstrating how the harms of oppression can be both subtle and insidious.

itself, and … one of the chief hindrances to human improvement.”

Establishing this required, Mill thought, undermining the “almost universal opinion” that the subordination of women to men in his society was natural and therefore just. To undermine this opinion, Mill addressed the question of why women in his society appeared to submit voluntarily to their oppression. His answer had three parts. First, Mill showed how women were made to be inferior, or allegedly inferior, to men by being coerced and by not having equal opportunities to develop their talents. The mechanisms that he had in mind, which were used to manufacture and entrench women’s inferiority, included both social roles such as motherhood and legal institutions such as marriage and property. Second, Mill showed how these real or perceived inferiorities were used to justify women’s inequalities: women were seen as not fit for the public sphere because of their fragile and flighty natures and inferior mental faculties. Finally, Mill showed how, unlike other oppressed groups, women were made, not just to obey their oppressors, but to want to obey them:

All men … desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favourite. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds. … All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others.

Women were raised to be content with their situation and to believe that their inferiority made their subordination to men natural. Women’s beliefs and desires were manipulated by the oppressive social situations in which they lived, Mill argued, so that they appeared to

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19 Mill, 125.
20 Mill, 126.
21 Mill, 141.
consent to these oppressive situations voluntarily. But women’s choice to acquiesce in their oppression was hollow, Mill argued, because it took place in the absence of meaningful alternatives—the choice was between “that or none.”

Mill’s account of the forces that conspired to oppress the women of his time was comprehensive and thorough; it encompassed economic, political, social, and psychological elements. Many of these themes were picked up by later scholars of oppression.

Almost 100 years later, Kate Millet was one of the first second-wave feminist scholars to touch on many of these elements. By her account, sexist oppression is made up of a political component, a psychological component, and a sociological component. The political component of sexist oppression has to do with women’s relative status: men are regarded as superior to women in a sexist society. The psychological component of sexist oppression has to do with people’s temperament: our personalities and characters are socialized to fall into two stereotyped sex categories in a sexist society. The sociological component of sexist oppression has to do with role: there are gendered codes of conduct, gesture, and attitude for each sex in a sexist society, and men get all the roles that are thought of as distinctively human while women get the roles that involve domestic service and childrearing.

Iris Marion Young’s influential definition of oppression also echoes Mill’s analysis. Young argues that oppression has “five faces:” exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Oppression involves exploitation when it facilitates the transfer of the results of some people’s labours to the benefit of others. Oppression

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22 Mill, 156.

23 Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1979).

involves *marginalization* when it prevents oppressed people from fully participating in social life, thus potentially subjecting them to severe material deprivation. Oppression involves *powerlessness* when it situates oppressed people so that they must take orders from others and rarely have the right to give them in return. Oppression involves *cultural imperialism* insofar as oppressed people’s perspectives, experiences, or cultures are simultaneously stereotyped and marked as deviant. Oppression involves *violence* when it fosters a social climate in which it is possible and even acceptable that oppressed people are systematically subject to violence, or the threat of violence, solely in virtue of their membership in an oppressed group.

I contend that that the economic, political, social, and psychological aspects of these analyses of the mechanisms of oppression can be used to identify many of the oppressive harms that women face even today.

**How Oppression Harms People’s Rational Nature**

We’ve just looked briefly at one of the earliest liberal accounts of oppression, found in the work of J.S. Mill. I’ve already praised Mill’s account for encompassing such a wide range of economic, political, social, and psychological elements. But it’s important to realize that Mill’s central concern with these elements was to demonstrate how they functioned in concert to deny the women of his time the opportunity to develop their rational capacities for thought and action. I want to pick this idea up now.

Unlike the examination of oppression in the previous sections—according to which oppression is a matter of being unjustly harmed in a group-specific way, where this harm is part of a structural and systemic network of social institutions—the discussion in this section isn’t a matter of conceptual analysis. Instead, I focus here on harms of oppression that, while not conceptually necessary, contingently occur very frequently. I emphasize here how
harm to the rational natures of the oppressed often goes hand in hand with other kinds of harms of oppression. That is, I show how psychological oppression almost always goes together with economic, political, and social oppression. It doesn’t matter if it’s logically possible for the different kinds of oppression to come apart and thus that it’s logically possible for there to be oppression without this kind of psychological harm; as a matter of fact, I argue, these harms almost always go together. The economic, political, and social harms of oppression are thus, in practice, bound up with the psychological harms of oppression.

The specific psychological harms of oppression I want to focus on are harms to the rational natures of those who are oppressed. Rational nature, as I understand it, is the capacity to set and pursue ends. Someone whose rational nature has been harmed will have a tendency to engage in particular forms of practical irrationality, I contend. Self-harming akrasia, self-deception with practical consequences, illogical practical deliberation: as we’ll see, oppression can cause people to engage in such behaviours. These behaviours are thus an indication that oppression has harmed one’s rational capacity to set and pursue ends.

If we think of how rational capacities improve as we mature, of how our human frailty reveals their vulnerabilities, and of how susceptibility to irrational action appears unevenly distributed in the population, it should occur to us that our capacity for practical rationality is an ordinary human capacity, as susceptible to damage as many other human capacities. If development through childhood builds this capacity, and trauma or neglect tears it down, then why not think that other forces are capable of affecting it as well? Oppression is one such force, I argue.

Frye’s birdcage metaphor illustrates how the systematic harms of oppression can be difficult to recognize. Another metaphor that I think is particularly useful for illustrating how the systematic effects of oppression can harm people’s rational natures is the metaphor
of the erosive effects of water dripping on stone. Erosion functions slowly and cumulatively: any individual drop of water will seem not to have any effect on a piece of stone, but, cumulatively, droplets of water are capable of wearing the stone away. Analogously, I contend, oppression can harm its victims’ rational natures in almost invisible increments. What might seem to be merely the harmless slights or annoyances or inconveniences of oppression can have a cumulative effect on people.

There are a number of different ways in which oppression damages our capacity for practical rationality. I discuss several of them next. Engaging in practically irrational behaviours like the ones I’m about to discuss is evidence that one’s rational nature has been harmed, I argue. Now, you needn’t agree with me about each of the ways, provided that you agree with me that oppression can damage our capacity for practical rationality in some way or other. Still, I think it is worth getting a sense of the range of different ways in which oppression can be damaging.

1. Oppression can cause practically significant self-deception.

A classic form of practical irrationality occurs when someone acts irrationally because she is engaging in self-deception. Someone who engages in self-deception might, for example, form a belief despite having strong evidence against it (because she is motivated by her desires, say); and, if she acts on that belief, she is acting in a way that, because she has strong evidence against the belief, she is in a position to know she has reason not to.

How might oppressive social conditions cause self-deceptive behaviour? This can happen because oppressive social systems create incentives for oppressed people to believe

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25 Thanks to Tim Schroeder for suggesting this metaphor and for encouraging me to pursue this line of thought.
certain falsehoods about themselves, contrary to their own evidence about themselves. A particularly interesting example of this is given by Elizabeth Anderson, who shows how contradictory sexist norms of femininity and sexuality can cause women to become “radically self-deceived” about their motivations for some of their actions. Anderson focuses on the case of women who seek abortions after having failed to use contraception. Despite not wanting to become pregnant, these women do not use contraception, Anderson argues, because doing so would force them to see themselves as “sexually active, receptive to sexual advances from strange men, taking sexual initiatives, [and] exercising agency with respect to their sexual choices.” And these women don’t want to see themselves in these ways because they are in the grip of other norms of femininity that are inconsistent with this picture of sexual agency. These women are “caught between contradictory norms of femininity: one that tells them it isn’t nice to have sex without intimacy; another that tells them it isn’t nice to refuse their date’s sexual demands unless they have a good excuse.” These women are thus “heteronomous agents self-destructively caught between contradictory external norms.” To put the point more concretely, they deceive themselves about the likelihood that they will have sex and so do not take steps to provide for contraception. But this is irrational behaviour, since they also do not take abortion to be as


27 Anderson, 385.

28 Anderson, 386.

29 Anderson, 386.
good a method for dealing with unwanted pregnancy as contraception. And this irrational
behaviour is evidence that these women have undergone harm to their rational nature.

2. Oppression can damage capacities for instrumental rational deliberation.

Another way oppression can harm people’s capacity to act rationally is by damaging their
capacities for instrumental rational deliberation. A person’s capacity for this sort of
deliberation is her capacity for using means-ends reasoning to determine how to pursue the
ends she has set.

Harm to someone’s capacity for instrumental rational deliberation could result, for
example, from depriving someone of the basic educational resources needed at key
developmental stages to fully develop these skills. There is evidence to suggest that various
factors that bear on people’s capacity for instrumental rational deliberation—things such as
people’s talents and their ability to see the value in delayed gratification—are highly
dependent on education or training in one way or another. Members of oppressed groups
are significantly more likely to be deprived of these sorts of resources. This sort of harm
could also result from long-term cognitive damage resulting from malnutrition at key
developmental stages. Members of oppressed groups are also more likely to face such
adversities. And this sort of harm could also result from oppression if a person’s

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30 Evidence that rational capacities are affected by access to high-quality educational opportunities comes from research examining educational programs such as Head Start, which was launched in 1964 as an attempt to equalize opportunities between children of different socioeconomic classes. For evidence documenting the effectiveness of such programs, see, for example, J. Currie, “Early Childhood Education Programs,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 15 (2001): 213-238; J. Currie and D. Thomas, “Does Head Start Make a Difference?,” *American Economic Review* 85 (1995): 341-364; E. Zigler and S. J. Styfco, eds., *The Head Start Debates*, (Baltimore: Brookes, 2004).

For evidence that what is generally thought of as inborn talent is often actually highly socially
independence is not fostered: if someone is always dependent on others to do things for her, her ability to figure out how to do things for herself can become impaired. If the means to your ends must always be to ask someone else to do it for you because you are unable to do it yourself, this could eventually impair your capacity to use instrumental rational deliberation to determine how to do things on your own. And of course, when oppression takes the form of infantilization, this can happen all too easily.

Another way oppression can damage capacities for instrumental rational deliberation has to do with the phenomenon known as internalized oppression. Internalized oppression occurs when people come to believe in, and so actually endorse, the social norms and stereotypes that are responsible for their oppression. Oppressive stereotypes can make other people believe that oppressed people are inferior in their rational capacities, and can thus make others treat them as such. But oppressive stereotypes can also make oppressed people themselves believe that they are inferior in this way, and can thus make oppressed people either treat themselves as such or accept such treatment from others. Internalized oppression can function as a self-fulfilling prophecy: an oppressed person can become what everyone already believes her to be.

Here’s an example of how this might work. Suppose there’s this African American kid, who’s smart enough, but he isn’t doing well at school. He doesn’t do his homework, he skips class a lot, he doesn’t study for tests. Say the reason this kid is failing his classes is that he’s internalized the oppressive social norm that says that excelling in school makes him “white.” This kid recognizes, on some level, that he’s not really expected to excel at school. Black kids aren’t expected to be on the college track. (To be clear, this expectation is an expression of some deeply racist beliefs: that black people are unintelligent, that they’re lazy,
that they’re best suited for manual labour. So these kids respond to this expectation by not setting college as a goal for themselves.

I want to say that this, too, is a case of practical irrationality. If we assume that this kid has set the end of leading a flourishing and happy life, then this kid—like all kids—has reason to do well at school, and to go to college, if he’s able. This is because someone’s life prospects improve with higher education. So his failure to plan to go to college is an instrumentally irrational way of trying to achieve his end of a leading a flourishing and happy life. And, again, the important point here is that this failure of practical rationality is a consequence of oppressive social norms.

3. Oppression can damage capacities for teleological rational deliberation.

Oppression can harm not just one’s capacity for instrumental rational deliberation—that is, one’s capacity for determining how to achieve the ends one has set; it can also harm one’s capacity for determining which ends to set in the first place. I’ll call this, for lack of a better term, teleological rational deliberation.31 People use instrumental rationality to determine how to pursue the ends they have set; people use teleological rationality to determine which ends to set for themselves.

Harm to someone’s capacity for teleological rational deliberation—her capacity to choose certain ends in the first place—can result from oppression because oppression can make it less likely that the oppressed will imagine or conceive of various choices as live options for people like them. This happens, for example, when someone internalizes social

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31 For an account of how this sort of reason can be involved in determining what ends we set, see Henry Richardson, *Practical Reasoning About Final Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
roles that rule out various lifestyle choices as inappropriate or undesirable for people like her.

This, we saw above, is the phenomenon known as *internalized oppression*. Internalized oppression can, for example, make oppressed people subject to the phenomenon of *sour grapes*: just as when the fox realizes that he cannot get the grapes he desires and so decides that they are sour, oppressed people can respond to the recognition that many worthwhile ends are outside their grasp by rejecting the value of those ends and deciding not to set them for themselves. Internalized oppression can also damage people’s sense of self-worth when they possess the mistaken beliefs about their intrinsic worth we considered earlier, so they don’t set certain worthwhile ends for themselves because they don’t think they deserve them.

A related way oppression can make people choose irrational ends has to do with its ability to make people disregard their future well-being. Thomas Nagel has argued that a requirement of practical reason is that one have prudential regard for one’s future well-being, but someone who has internalized the belief that she is inferior to others can be more likely to act in ways that don’t protect her future well-being.

Harm to people’s capacities for teleological rational deliberation could also result from institutionalizing, medicating, or lobotomizing someone—all situations oppressed people are more likely to have imposed upon them—or from extreme cases of depression—again, something oppressed people are more likely to endure. Terror or trauma caused by violence or the threat of violence can also impair someone’s capacity to set ends using means-ends reasoning if it is severe. This sort of harm can also result from malnutrition—something possibly experienced by some of the Bengali women we considered earlier.

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4. Oppression can cause weakness of will.

Weakness of will—*akrasia*—is a matter of deciding what one has reason to do in a given situation, deciding to do it, but then doing something else instead because one has given in to countervailing pressures that have been brought on by various non-rational considerations.

One way oppression might cause someone to do this turns on the self-fulfilling prophecies that can result when people who are oppressed internalize derogatory stereotypes that depict people like them as lazy or impetuous or irresponsible. Someone who has internalized such stereotypes just might not hold herself to very high standards of rationality and thus might be more susceptible to succumbing to weakness of will in various circumstances. If you know that others expect people like you to succumb to certain temptations, you might eventually come to expect yourself to succumb, and it can be that much harder to resist such temptations when they arise.

Another example of how oppression can cause weakness of will can be found in the case of abortion-seeking women we considered earlier. At least some of these women consent to unwanted sex, Anderson claims, because they can’t see how to say ‘no’. One explanation of what has gone on here is that such women suffer from weakness of will that has been inculcated by internalizing social norms that fail to teach young women to stand up for themselves when it’s men they need to stand up to. These women recognize that they have good reason to refrain from having sex but give in to their partners’ sexual demands nevertheless. And engaging in this irrational behaviour is evidence that their rational nature has been harmed in some way.
I don’t take this to be an exhaustive list of the ways oppression can harm our capacity for practical rationality. These are merely some of the practically irrational behaviours that are fostered by oppression. Engaging in these sorts of practically irrational behaviours, I contend, is evidence that one’s rational nature has been harmed. The erosion metaphor illustrates how these harms are often cumulative and not always immediately obvious.

CONCLUSION
The definition of oppression I’ve put forth here has two conditions. The first condition tells us that someone is oppressed when she has undergone an unjust harm to which she is subject in virtue of her membership in a group or category of people. More specifically, an individual is harmed in this group-specific way if and only if (a) she is harmed in virtue of being a member of a group, $G$; (b) on balance, members of $G$ have a relative lack of social esteem, power, or authority; (c) on balance, members of another group, $G^*$, benefit from her being harmed; and, (d) this harm is unfair, unearned, or illegitimate in some other way. The second condition of our definition of oppression tells us that someone is oppressed when she has undergone a harm that is part of a structural and systemic network of social institutions. The systematicity of oppression is best explained by Frye’s birdcage metaphor, which illustrates how it can be hard to recognize people’s oppression if you focus exclusively on any particular social, political, or economic institution or even if you focus exclusively on any particular restriction or frustration or instance of harm. Oppression is thus best understood from a macroscopic point of view that takes into account how economic, political, social, and psychological factors function in concert.
Another useful metaphor that can illustrate how the systematic effects of oppression can harm people’s rational natures is the metaphor of the erosive effects of water dripping on stone. Just as erosion functions slowly and cumulatively, oppression can harm its victims’ rational natures in almost invisible increments. We looked at several ways this can happen. Self-deception, weakness of will, illogical practical deliberation: these are merely some of the practically irrational behaviours that are fostered by oppression. Engaging in these sorts of practically irrational behaviours, I’ve argued, is evidence that one’s rational nature has been harmed. And as I’ll argue in what follows, this sort of harm is something that people have an obligation to resist.
CHAPTER 3
AN OBLIGATION TO RESIST ONE’S OWN OPPRESSION

My aim in this dissertation is to establish that oppressed people have an obligation to resist their oppression. This obligation, I contend, is an instance of a more general obligation: namely, to respect and protect some morally important feature, or features, of persons. In this chapter I give an account of the general obligation to respect and protect these features and then show how this obligation applies to the specific case of oppression. This account is Kantian: I argue that Kant’s account of the value of rational nature captures what these morally important features of persons are and that his arguments about why rational nature must be respected can explain why there is an obligation to respect these features. I go on to argue that Kant’s account of rational nature is promising both for making sense of what about persons makes oppression count as harmful and for grounding the sorts of obligations to ourselves and to others that underlie the obligation to resist oppression. Ultimately, my goal here is to articulate and defend a compelling view of the moral importance of our rational nature and the attendant obligations we have toward it, rather than to defend a particular interpretation of Kant’s texts. Still, I think that following Kant closely is essential to achieving this goal, so this chapter, and the chapters that follow, contain a significant amount of interpretive work.

I argue that the obligation to resist oppression is, in an important sense, an obligation someone has to herself. Kant’s theoretical framework is particularly well-suited for
accounting for the self-oriented nature of this obligation. And while the very possibility of obligations to the self is something that some philosophers find unintelligible, there are good arguments in defence of the possibility of such obligations. After endorsing these arguments, I go on to consider other arguments for why the obligation to resist oppression might be better thought of as an obligation to others rather than to the self, or as an obligation to respect rational nature in general. While I think there is something right about accounts of the obligation to resist one’s oppression that make sense of this obligation in terms of the obligations one has to others, I argue that these accounts cannot, ultimately, solve certain philosophical problems that my account can solve. I conclude by considering an objection to my view that derives from certain considerations brought to light by standpoint theorists.

AN OBLIGATION TO RESPECT RATIONAL NATURE

I’m drawn to Kant’s moral framework because I think his account of the value of rational nature captures what are perhaps the most morally important features of persons. And I think Kant’s arguments about why rational nature must be respected offer a convincing explanation of why we have an obligation to respect these features. Let’s take a closer look at these arguments now.

The relevant bit of Kantian jargon here is what Kant calls our humanity. Humanity, for Kant, is not the whole of human nature, but is, rather, a particular subset of characteristics that are often associated with human nature: specifically, those having to do with rational nature. Kant characterizes humanity as a set of capacities that have to do with our rational nature. In the most general terms, humanity is the capacity to act on principles
or maxims: that is, to act for reasons.\textsuperscript{1,2} More specifically, humanity includes the capacity to follow certain hypothetical imperatives or to act from rational principles of prudence and efficiency;\textsuperscript{3} it also includes the capacity to follow categorical imperatives or to act from certain unconditional principles of conduct independently of the fear of punishment or the promise of reward.\textsuperscript{4} Humanity also includes the capacity, which is lacking in lower animals, to anticipate future consequences, to adopt long-term goals, to resist short-term temptations, and to adopt ends for which one has no sensuous inclinations.\textsuperscript{5,6} Finally, humanity includes

\textsuperscript{1} “Only a rational being has the capacity to act \textit{in accordance with the representation} of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a will. Since reason is required for the derivation of actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason. … If reason infallibly determines the will, the actions of such a being that are cognized as objectively necessary are also subjectively necessary, that is, the will is a capacity to choose \textit{only that} which reason independently of inclination cognizes as practically necessary, that is, as good” (\textit{G} 4:412).

\textsuperscript{2} “The capacity to set oneself an end—any end whatsoever—is what characterizes humanity” (\textit{DV} 6:392).

\textsuperscript{3} “[Hypothetical imperatives] represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wills (or that it is at least possible for one to will). … Since every practical law represents a possible action as good and therefore as necessary for a subject practically determinable by reason, all imperatives are formulae for the determination of action that is necessary in accordance with the principle of a will which is good in some way. Now, if the action would be good merely as a means \textit{to something else} the imperative is \textit{hypothetical}; … One can think of what is possible only through the powers of some rational being as also a possible purpose of some will” (\textit{G} 4:414-15).

\textsuperscript{4} “[T]here is one imperative that, without being based upon and having as its condition any other purpose to be attained by certain conduct, commands this conduct immediately. This imperative is \textbf{categorical}. It has not to do with the matter of the action and what is to result from it, but with the form and the principle from which the action itself follows; and the essentially good in the action consists in the disposition, let the result be what it may. This imperative may be called the imperative \textbf{of morality}. … [O]nly law brings with it the concept of an \textit{unconditional} and objective and hence universally valid \textit{necessity}, and commands are laws that must be obeyed, that is, must be followed even against inclination” (\textit{G} 4:416).

\textsuperscript{5} “\textit{Will} is a kind of causality of living beings insofar as they are rational, and \textit{freedom} would be that property of such causality that it can be efficient independently of alien \textit{causes determining} it, just as \textit{natural necessity} is the property of the causality of all nonrational beings to be determined to activity by the influence of alien causes” (\textit{G} 4:446).
the capacity to understand the world and reason abstractly. In short, humanity is our rational nature: our capacity to set and pursue ends through reason.\textsuperscript{7}

But for Kant humanity does not belong only to human beings. Rather, humanity is attributable to “the human being and every rational being in general” (\textit{G} 4:428). Kant must allow that humanity could exist in something other than human beings because of the particular role humanity plays in his practical philosophy. Kant, famously, is committed to the idea that moral principles must not be dependent on anything contingent.\textsuperscript{8,9} Yet, if humanity were simply human nature, then it, like human nature, would be such that it could have been otherwise. Because humanity is what grounds the moral law, it must not be dependent on what human nature happens to be. Humanity is therefore distinct from human nature. Humanity must instead be attributable to any being with the capacity for rationality.

\textsuperscript{6} “[Imperatives] say that to do or to omit something would be good, but they say it to a will that does not always do something just because it is represented to it that it would be good to do that thing. Practical good, however, is that which determines the will by means of representations of reason, hence not by subjective causes but objectively, that is, from grounds that are valid for every rational being as such. [The practical good] is distinguished from the agreeable, as that which influences the will only by means of feeling from merely subjective causes, which hold only for the senses of this or that one, and not as a principle of reason, which holds for everyone” (\textit{G} 4:413).


\textsuperscript{8} “Everyone must grant that a law, if it is to hold morally, that is, as a ground of obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity; that, for example, the command ‘thou shalt not lie’ does not hold only for human beings, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it, and so with all other moral laws properly so called; that, therefore, the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason” (\textit{G}: 4:389-390).

\textsuperscript{9} “[I]t is of the utmost importance to take warning that we must not let ourselves think of wanting to derive the reality of this principle from the special property of human nature. For, duty is to be practical unconditional necessity of action and it must therefore hold for all rational beings (to which alone an imperative can apply at all) and \textit{only because of this} be also a law for all human wills” (\textit{G} 4:425).
It’s a matter of some controversy precisely how to interpret Kant’s argument for the value of humanity. However, a fairly well-accepted interpretation of the Formula of Humanity, the section of the *Groundwork* where Kant establishes the value of rational nature, takes the following form.\(^{10}\) Kant begins by pointing out that ordinary things have value only insofar as someone actually values them.\(^{11}\) Because the relation between value and reason is such that we can have a reason to perform an action only if the goal of that action is valuable to us, ordinary things can give us reasons for action only if we happen to value them.\(^{12}\) If anything is to give us reasons for action that are independent of what we contingently value—that is, if we can have reason to do something other than if we just happen to want to do it—there must be something with intrinsic and absolute value to provide these reasons.\(^{13, 14}\) Whatever this is, it must be objectively good according to standards that hold for every rational being. In other words, it must be an *end in itself*.\(^{15}\) Kant asserts that there is

10 Wood and Korsgaard advance different versions of this interpretation, in “The Formula of Humanity as and End in Itself,” and “Kant’s Formula of Humanity,” respectively.

11 “All objects of the inclinations have only a conditional worth; for, if there were not inclinations and the needs based on them, their object would be without worth. … Thus the worth of any object to be acquired by our action is always conditional” (G 4:428).

12 “The ends that a rational being proposes at his discretion as effects of his actions (material ends) are all only relative; for only their mere relation to a specially constituted faculty of desire on the part of the subject gives them their worth. … Hence all these relative ends are only the ground of hypothetical imperatives (G 4:428).

13 “But suppose there were something the existence of which in itself has an absolute worth, something which as an end in itself could be a ground of determinate laws; then in it, and in it alone, would lie the ground of a possible categorical imperative, that is, of a practical law” (G 4:428).

14 “Since without it nothing of absolute worth would be found anywhere; but if all worth were conditional and therefore contingent, then no supreme practical principle for reason could be found anywhere” (G 4:428).

15 “If, then, there is to be a supreme practical principle and, with respect to the human will, a categorical imperative, it must be one such that, from the representation of what is necessarily an end
something that has this sort of value: our rational capacity to make decisions about what is valuable.\(^{16}\) And so, in virtue of our rational capacity to make value judgements, we have this sort of value. Our objective value means we have value independently of whether anyone happens to value us. Unlike the things we value contingently, our value is intrinsic and absolute.\(^ {17}\)

Rational nature is objectively valuable, then, because its objective value is presupposed by every value judgement. It’s because it is a presupposition of our value judgements (and of any other act of practical rationality) that whatever is making these judgements—whatever is setting these ends according to reason—is a respectable authority on such matters. Unless we respect our rational nature as objectively good, none of the value judgements we make with our rational nature—none of the ends we set—can be objectively good. So, if there is to be any objective goodness in the world—if any of the ends we set are to be objectively good—this goodness must be grounded in our rational nature (which we must view as objectively valuable, as an end in itself). And each rational individual, insofar as she’s rational, must necessarily\(^ {18}\) recognize this about herself, that because her rational nature grounds the for everyone because it is an end in itself, it constitutes an objective principle of the will and can thus serve as a universal practical law” (\(G\) 4:428-429).

\(^{16}\) “Now I say that the human being and in general every rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion” (\(G\) 4:428).

\(^{17}\) “Beings the existence of which rests not on our will but on nature, if they are beings without reason, still have only a relative worth, as means, and are therefore called things, whereas rational beings are called persons because their nature already marks them out as an end in itself, that is, as something that may not be used merely as a means, and hence so far limits all choice (and is an object of respect). These, therefore, are not merely subjective ends, the existence of which as an effect of our actions has a worth for us, but rather objective ends, that is, beings the existence of which is in itself an end, and indeed one such that no other end, to which they would serve merely as a means, can be put in its place” (\(G\) 4:429).

\(^{18}\) The force of this necessity, to be clear, is rational rather than psychological or metaphysical.
objective value of all other things *her* rational nature is an end in itself. But each rational individual, insofar as she’s rational, also must necessarily recognize that, just as this holds true for her rational nature, it holds true for *anyone else* with the same (i.e., rational) nature. The judgement that one’s own rational nature is an end in itself thus generalizes to the judgement that rational nature in general is an end in itself. This, then, is how we reach the Formula of Humanity’s derivation of the Categorical Imperative: “*So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*” (*G* 4:429).

The necessity of respecting rational nature follows straightforwardly from the sort of value it has. As we’ll see, anything with this sort of value must be respected accordingly, Kant argues. Something that is an end in itself may neither be regarded nor treated as a mere means to some other end; this would be to regard or treat it as if its value were instrumental rather than intrinsic. We thus may neither regard nor treat ourselves or others as only instrumentally valuable; unlike mere things, we must, in virtue of our rational nature, 19 “The human being necessarily represents his own existence in this way; so far it is thus a subjective principle of human actions” (*G* 4:429).

20 “But every other rational being also represents his existence in this way consequent on just the same rational ground that also holds for me; thus it is at the same time an objective principle from which, as a supreme practical ground, it must be possible to derive all laws of the will” (*G* 4:429).

21 It’s worth noting here the way in which this interpretation of Kant’s argument is conditional: Kant is arguing that *if* there is anything that is objectively prescriptive (i.e., capable of telling us what to do categorically, not hypothetically), it must be explained by appealing to the objective value of our rational nature. In other words, the objective value of our rational nature is a precondition of the possibility of objectively prescriptive morality. The conditional nature of this argument means that it is no answer to the amoralist: it is not meant to convince anyone who is sceptical about the very existence of morality (i.e., of objectively prescriptive judgements). The argument is meant to address an audience who already acknowledges that morality exists and is inquiring merely after an explanation of its nature.
be respected as ends in ourselves. This means rational beings must never be treated merely as things. Because we are rational, we are worthy of a certain kind of respect.

**WHAT DOES THIS OBLIGATION REQUIRE?**

The obligation to respect rational nature is fundamental on the Kantian picture; the obligation to respect individual people in virtue of their rational nature derives from this more basic obligation. This means that the obligation to respect people in virtue of their rational nature applies equally to anyone with rational nature: this obligation applies to one’s own rational nature in precisely the same way that it applies to the rational nature of others. Just as we must recognize the intrinsic value that other people have and respect them accordingly, we must recognize this about our own value and respect ourselves accordingly.

But what, precisely, is required by the obligation to respect people in virtue of their rational nature? Remember, Kant’s Formula of Humanity famously commands you to act so “that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (G 4:429). What does it mean to treat people’s humanity—that is, their rational nature—as an end, rather than merely as a means?

Respecting people’s rational nature clearly rules out the permissibility of other people casually killing us or injuring us in ways that would prevent the future exercise of our rational nature. This obligation also requires people to appeal to our reason and never to coerce or manipulate us: forcing or tricking us would be using our rational nature as a means to

22 “[I]n the order of ends the human being (and with him every rational being) is an end in itself, that is, can never be used merely as a means by anyone (not even by God) without being at the same time himself an end, and that humanity in our person must, accordingly, be holy to ourselves: for he is the subject of the moral law and so of that which is holy in itself, on account of which and in agreement with which alone can anything be called holy” (CPR 5:131-132).
someone else’s ends. The only way for others to obtain our cooperation and still treat us as
ends in ourselves is for them to let us decide matters for ourselves by appealing to our
reason. We should therefore be free to set and pursue our own ends and not have ends
imposed upon us against our will.

The injunction to treat people as ends in themselves is generally taken to mean that
respecting people’s rational natures forbids using people in certain ways. We may not use
another person to achieve our purposes, no matter how good those purposes might be,
because this would be to treat this person as a mere means to our ends rather than as an end
in herself. Anyone who has rational nature may not be used merely as an instrument, the
way ordinary objects are used.

Another thing worth noticing is that Kant also says of rational nature that it is not an
end to be effected, but is instead an independently-existing end:

Rational nature is distinguished from the rest of nature by this, that it sets
itself an end. This end would be the matter of every good will. But since, in
the idea of a will absolutely good without any limiting condition (attainment
of this or that end) abstraction must be made altogether from every end to be
effected (this would make every will only relatively good), the end must here be
thought not as an end to be effected but as an independently existing end, and
hence thought only negatively, that is, as that which must never be acted
against and which must therefore in every volition be estimated never merely
as a means but always at the same time as an end (G 4:437).

One of the points Kant is making here is that rational nature isn’t something that we have an
obligation to try to produce when it does not yet exist, but that when it exists it is valuable
and thus must be respected. So, on the Kantian picture, the appropriate response to the
recognition that people have intrinsic value in virtue of their rational nature isn’t that we
must try to maximize instances of that value (by, say, creating as many new people with
rational nature as possible). Rather, the appropriate response to the recognition that people
have intrinsic value in virtue of their rational nature is that we must have a certain attitude of
*respect* toward people who already have this nature. This attitude of respect requires not only that we protect this nature from being harmed; we must also foster its development. We are obligated not just to refrain from damaging other people’s rational nature, but also to enable the exercise of this rational nature in various ways.

But, remember, the obligation to respect people in virtue of their rational nature applies to one’s own rational nature in precisely the same way that it applies to the rational nature of others. So we must not just prevent others from damaging our rational nature; we must also try to cultivate and exercise our rational nature. Someone who fails to cultivate her rational nature, or who allows her rational nature to deteriorate, or who simply doesn’t bother to exercise her rational nature when it is appropriate for her to do so, cannot be said to be respecting this nature in herself. Similarly, we fail to treat our rational nature as an end in itself when we trade or sacrifice it for something else we happen to want. This would be to treat this nature as a mere means to some other end.

One thing that’s distinctive about the Kantian framework is its ability to analyze this obligation of respect insofar as it applies to oneself. Kant’s discussion of the demands placed on us by the obligation of self-respect takes place mostly in the context of his articulation of the various attitudes we should not have, and the various actions we should not perform, if we are to have proper self-respect. Kant says much more about how we should *not* regard or treat ourselves than he does about how we *should*. He does, however, give some concrete examples of what it would be to fail to fulfill the obligation of self-respect:

Be no man’s lackey. – Do not let others tread with impunity on your rights. – Contract no debt for which you cannot give full security. – Do not accept favors you could do without, and do not be a parasite or a flatterer or *(what really differs from these only in degree)* a beggar. Be thrifty, then, so that you will not become destitute. – Complaining and whining, even crying out in bodily pain, is unworthy of you, especially if you are aware of having deserved it; … . – Kneeling down or prostrating oneself on the ground, even
to show your veneration for heavenly objects, is contrary to the dignity of humanity, as is invoking them in actual images; for you then humble yourself, not before an ideal represented to you by your own reason, but before an idol of your own making. (DV 6:436-437)

Though these examples are obviously a bit dated—they clearly reflect the social mores of Kant’s time—they are nevertheless telling. What the examples have in common, it seems, is that they are all cases where one is subordinating oneself to another or where one is expressing the belief that one is not the moral equal of others. One of the ways that someone might lack self-respect, then, is by failing to recognize that her moral status is equal to that of all rational beings or by failing to act as if she recognizes this about herself. 23 That is, someone could fail to have self-respect by failing to respect the fact that her basic status as a human being entitles her to certain kinds of equal treatment with others. 24

While clearly central for Kant, a failure to recognize one’s equal moral status with others is not, I think, the only way one could fail to fulfill the obligation of self-respect. There are other ways one might fail to have self-respect, suggested by the Kantian framework, that Kant does not explicitly consider. Someone might fail to have self-respect, for example, by underestimating or undervaluing something that she has legitimately earned. Similarly, someone might fail to have self-respect by acting as if she undervalues or underestimates something that she has legitimately earned. If someone does not properly appreciate and respect her merits, achievements, acquired talents, or earned social position—


24 We’ll return to this idea in the next chapter. There, we’ll characterize this as a failure of someone to have recognition respect for herself.
or if she acts as if she does not appreciate these things—she has failed to respect herself in a certain way.\textsuperscript{25, 26}

We’ll see below that failures of both of these kinds of self-respect can be implicated in conditions of oppression. The sort of self-respect that will bear most directly on the obligation to resist one’s own oppression will be the sort that is also most central for Kant. Others have argued that the obligation to resist one’s own oppression is an instance of an obligation to have the sort of self-respect where someone recognizes that she is the moral equal of everyone else and demands that she be treated accordingly. I endorse these accounts, and add to them the argument that the Kantian obligation that is of particular importance under oppression is the obligation to protect one’s rational nature from certain harms.

\textbf{WHY THE OPPRESSED HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO RESIST THEIR OPPRESSION}

As we’ve just seen, the obligation to respect our rational nature translates directly into an obligation to respect this nature in ourselves and thus to resist what threatens it. And, as we saw in Chapter 2, oppression is one such threat: oppression can harm someone’s rational nature by damaging her capacity either to set or to pursue her ends. What can be the best

\textsuperscript{25} We’ll return to this idea in the next chapter. There, we’ll characterize this as a failure of someone to have \textit{appraisal respect} for herself.

\textsuperscript{26} Thomas Hill considers both these kinds of lack of self-respect, as well as a third kind, in “Self-Respect Reconsidered” (cited above in note 23). There, he argues that one can fail to have self-respect in a way that is independent of either one’s rights or one’s merits. To fail to have self-respect in this third way is to fail to live up to certain \textit{personal} standards. The sorts of standards Hill has in mind here are those according to which someone judges her own conduct, but which she does not extend to others. This sort of self-respect requires of people that they develop and live by certain (morally permissible) standards—be they ideals one strives for, or simply lines one cannot cross without disgracing oneself in one’s own eyes. I think Hill has put his finger on a legitimate way that one can fail to have self-respect here, but because it bears less directly on my project than the other sorts of failures of self-respect just considered—failures to respect rights or merits—I set it aside.
evidence that someone’s rational capacities have been damaged by oppression, I argued, is that she engages in certain practically irrational behaviours.

On a Kantian picture of moral psychology, the key components of our capacity to act rationally—that is, our capacity for practical rationality—are our capacities to form beliefs, our capacities to practically deliberate from our beliefs to our intentions, and our capacities to form intentions in a particular way—by endorsing principles or, in other words, giving laws to ourselves. We are practically rational when our beliefs are appropriately produced by practical reasoning and when we endorse principles in such a way that our intentions are consistent—both internally consistent and consistent with the Categorical Imperative. Our capacity for practical rationality can be harmed when harm is done either to our capacities to form reasonable practically relevant beliefs, to our capacities to form reasonable—that is, consistent—intentions on the basis of these reasonable beliefs, or to our capacities for practically deliberating from beliefs to intentions.

I argued in Chapter 2 that damage to oppressed people’s capacities for instrumental or teleological rational deliberation can be the result of any of a number of different manifestations of oppression. Malnutrition at key developmental stages can cause cognitive damage that can impair these capacities. So can fear caused by violence or the threat of violence. This sort of harm can also be caused by a lack of access to educational opportunities resulting from either a lack of economic resources or from social norms that discourage or outright forbid the education of oppressed people. Related social norms discourage or prevent the oppressed from undertaking careers or other pursuits that would further develop their rational nature and instead compel them to spend their time performing hard labour, domestic drudgeries, or other unstimulating activities. These norms
can also force oppressed people to be dependent on others, thus impairing their ability to deliberate about how to set or pursue ends on their own.

Oppressive social norms can make oppressed people engage in a variety of other practically irrational behaviours. These norms can, for example, give people an incentive to succumb to weakness of will by functioning as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy: people can internalize, and so live up to, the derogatory expectations society has of people like them. These norms can also encourage self-deception when they catch people in the grip of inconsistent and thus mutually unsatisfiable social expectations: stuck in a situation where there is no way to live up to everything that is expected of them, oppressed people can deceive themselves into thinking (and therefore acting) in ways they’re in a position to know they have reason not to.

Insofar as oppression harms people in these ways, and given that the obligation to respect rational nature requires resisting that which harms or threatens this nature, there is an obligation to resist oppression. And because in this Kantian picture the obligation to respect rational nature applies, not only to others, but also to the self, there is an obligation to resist one’s own oppression.

A further consideration that tells in favour of the obligation to resist oppression being, at least in part, an obligation to the self is that resisting one’s own oppression has agency-enhancing effects that having one’s oppression resisted by another on one’s behalf do not. This is particularly the case if someone’s rational capacities have already been compromised. If someone’s rational capacities have never been subject to the sorts of harms we’ve been considering and are thus more or less intact, it probably won’t make much difference whether a third party intervenes to prevent them from being damaged or whether she resists this damage herself. But if someone’s rational capacities have already been
partially compromised, there can be something transformative about her standing up for herself. The particular ways of exercising one’s rational capacities required by acts of attempting to resist harms to these capacities can be what is ultimately most effective in protecting them. This is particularly so given the ways that oppression can damage one’s independence. Coming to someone’s rescue by resisting her oppression for her can actually exacerbate the problem, if the problem is that oppression is threatening her ability to do things for herself. What is perhaps the best way to cultivate independence is to assert it; standing up to someone or something that is threatening to make you feel like you’re unable to set or pursue your ends can be the best way to ensure that this threat is unsuccessful.

There are also good practical reasons, then, to think the obligation to resist oppression must be one oppressed people have to themselves.27

Restricted access to educational and career opportunities, malnutrition, self-fulfilling prophecies of inferiority, diminished senses of one’s relative worth that result in a diminished sense of desert, forced dependencies, living in fear: these phenomena represent merely some of the interconnected ways that oppression can harm the rational nature of people who are oppressed. Because there is an obligation to protect one’s rational nature, in cases where oppression harms (or threatens to harm) rational nature, one has an obligation to protect oneself from these sorts of harms.

But I want to consider now whether harms like these occur in all instances of oppression, and thus whether this obligation applies in all cases of oppression. What should we make of cases of oppression where the harm (or threat of harm) to one’s rational nature

27 Thanks to Tim Schroeder for suggesting this point.
isn’t as clearly evident as in the cases we’ve been focusing on? Many cases of oppression are like this. Does the obligation to resist oppression exist in these sorts of cases as well?

Take, for example, the case of Native Companion that we considered in Chapter 1. Native Companion, remember, argued that she was under no obligation to confront the carnies who sexually harassed her because resisting wouldn’t do any good. Is she on to something here? Is there nothing she is obligated to do in this situation? Or does she have an obligation to resist her oppression? Even though she has clearly been subjected to sexist oppression, it’s not obvious that her rational nature has been harmed by the carnies’ harassment. Nor is it clear that this harassment even threatens to harm her rational nature.

To defend the claim that Native Companion ought to resist her oppression for the reasons of interest to me in this project, we need to show that there is some way that her rational nature is affected.

A defence of this claim relies upon the systematicity of oppression. Remember, as Frye’s birdcage metaphor suggests, the systematicity of oppression means that the detrimental effects of oppression are usually only fully evident from a perspective that takes their effects on a person’s life prospects into account all at once. So, while the carnies’ harassment might not directly harm (or threaten to harm) Native Companion’s rational nature, it’s important to notice that neither does this harassment occur in a social vacuum. I contend that this harassment harms (or at least threatens to harm) her rational nature indirectly. For one thing, Native Companion’s experience of sexual harassment takes place in a cultural context where the sexual objectification of women is rampant and where the gendered sexual roles of dominance and submission that derive from this objectification
result in disproportionately high rates of sexual violence against women. Of the many terrible effects of this violence, one is that being its target could harm someone’s rational nature. This harm could occur in several of the ways we considered earlier: physiological trauma could, for example, cause cognitive impairments that undermine one’s capacity for instrumental or teleological rational deliberation. Native Companion is at a greater risk of being subjected to this sort of trauma simply in virtue of being a woman, and by letting the carnies get away with harassing her she fails to do what she can to undermine the oppressive system that is responsible for her facing this risk.

Another way the culture of sexual objectification that underlies Native Companion’s harassment might indirectly harm her rational nature has to do with the sexist norms that women internalize as a result of the ubiquity of this objectification. Catharine MacKinnon has famously claimed that “all women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water;” Martha Nussbaum has interpreted this metaphor to mean, “not only that objectification surrounds women, but also that they have become such that they derive their very nourishment and sustenance from it.” Internalizing these sexist norms can cause harms to women’s teleological rationality insofar as they rule out adopting certain worthwhile ends because they’re preoccupied with more trivial ones: a woman might devote more time and energy to presenting herself as sexually attractive than she devotes to her


29 MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, 124.

studies or career, for example, because she’s accepted the sexist message that it’s more important that she be attractive to men than that she be intelligent or independent.

Admittedly, this quick sketch doesn’t do everything that needs to be done to show exactly how the systematicity of oppression indirectly harms, or even threatens to harm, the rational nature of women like Native Companion. Frye’s birdcage metaphor is evocative, certainly, but what really needs to be shown here is exactly how the harm of being harassed by carnies functions in concert with the other harms of sexist oppression to harm Native Companion’s rational nature. I think this can be done, but I don’t pretend to have done all of it here. What I’ve offered here, then, is a suggestion of the direction in which this argument should go. Ideally, the case for how someone like Native Companion faces the risk of harm to her rational nature because of oppression should be backed up with evidence from empirical psychology, as well as a clearer theoretical explication of precisely how the many different forces of oppression function in concert.

Still, on the assumption that it can be made clear exactly how the interrelated aspects of sexist oppression harm, or threaten to harm, Native Companion’s rational nature (in one of the ways discussed earlier, or in some other way), it turns out that Native Companion has an obligation to resist her oppression. This is because the oppressive harms of sexual harassment that Native Companion faces at the hands of the carnies are part of an interconnected web of oppressive harms that function collectively to harm, or threaten to harm, her rational nature. So, even though the sexual harassment she faces is not clearly a direct harm to her rational nature, she nevertheless has an obligation to resist her oppression. She may not stand idly by and allow these men to get away with harassing her. And the ultimate justification for this obligation to resist her oppression is that she has an obligation to resist what harms her rational nature.
If this talk of systematicity is still unconvincing, forget about Frye’s birdcage for a moment and think again about the erosive effects of water dripping on stone. As we said in Chapter 2, any individual drop of water will seem not to have any effect on a piece of stone, but, cumulatively, droplets of water are capable of wearing the stone away. Analogously, I argued, rational nature can be harmed in almost invisible increments. What might seem to be merely the harmless slights or annoyances or inconveniences of oppression can have a cumulative effect on people’s rational nature. This means that there’s a case for extending the obligation to resist one’s oppression to cover even those instances of oppression that seem not to directly harm one’s rational nature—because the systematicity of oppression makes these harms as likely to occur corrosively as discretely.

We’ve now considered a number of ways that oppression can damage one’s capacity for practical rationality, and thus harm one’s rational nature. These harms can be direct or indirect. Our evidence for these harms can likewise be direct or indirect. One explanation for why certain people have a tendency to engage in particular forms of practical irrationality, I’ve argued, is that their rational nature has been harmed in some way. Engaging in forms of practical irrationality such as self-harming akrasia, self-deception with practical consequences, or illogical practical deliberation all counts as evidence of damage to one’s rational capacities. And, as we’ve seen, oppression can cause people to engage in such behaviours. These behaviours are thus an indication that oppression has harmed one’s rational capacity to set and pursue ends. So, because we have an obligation to resist these sorts of harms, we have an obligation to resist oppression.
OTHER ACCOUNTS

The claim that the oppressed have an obligation to resist their oppression, and that this obligation is in some way an obligation to the self, is not unprecedented in the feminist canon. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an early advocate of women’s rights, is famously said to have declared that “self-development is a higher obligation than self-sacrifice.” Mary Wollstonecraft, one of feminism’s earliest writers, argued that women ought not to abide by conventional social mores that valued them solely for their beauty and charm. Following on the heels of the Enlightenment, Wollstonecraft extends the ideals of rationality and individualism to women. She argues that women’s primary obligation is to themselves as rational beings and that fulfilling this obligation requires resisting many of the conventional gender roles prescribed by genteel society:

The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens …. The rank in life which dispenses with their fulfilling this duty, necessarily degrades them by making them mere dolls.  

A century and a half later, Simone de Beauvoir argued that women who consent to their oppression fail in their obligation to themselves to live existentially authentic lives. In explaining why, unlike members of other oppressed groups, women have not resisted their oppression, de Beauvoir argues that women acquiesce in their oppression because to do otherwise would be to renounce the few advantages that they do get from their oppressive relationships with men. Acquiescing in their oppression not only affords many women some degree of material protection, it also allows women to avoid taking existential

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responsibility for their lives. De Beauvoir believes, along with many other existentialists, that living an existentially authentic life can be difficult, even terrifying. Most people, existentialists believe, are cowardly and prefer to avoid taking on the responsibility of defining for themselves what their lives will be about. But the act making self-defining choices is what existentialists take to be distinctive of an authentic human existence. Social roles in general are existentially problematic—in effect, they make these self-defining choices for people inauthentically. But women’s social roles are particularly problematic, de Beauvoir argues: women’s socially prescribed gender roles offer them very few, if any, opportunities to make existentially authentic choices. When women take on the role of a wife or the role of a mother, their lives become completely defined by their relationships to their husbands or their children. In effect, women lose their sense of self; they become an “Other,” in de Beauvoir’s terms. But adopting the role of the Other is easier, and less frightening, than carving out for oneself a life that has value and meaning. This is why it can seem like an advantage for women to acquiesce in their oppression by taking on these roles. De Beauvoir condemns this failure to take existential responsibility for oneself as a form of cowardice and argues, essentially, that women have an obligation to reject the conventional gender roles that lead them down this path.

To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be party to the deal—this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste. Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance. Indeed, along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road, for he who takes it—passive, lost, ruined—becomes henceforth the creature of another’s will, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value. But it is an easy
road; on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence.\textsuperscript{32}

This is, of course, far too quick a sketch of these feminists’ accounts. I mean only to show here that they are historical examples of people who have advocated different versions of the claim that people have an obligation to themselves to resist their own oppression.

The distinctiveness of my account here is thus not that people have an obligation to themselves to resist oppression—this much has been argued by others—but that this obligation to the self is of a particular sort. That is, I argue that this obligation is best thought of as akin to a Kantian obligation of respect for one’s own rational nature.

But this, too, has been argued by others. By far the most prominent Kantian account of why people have an obligation to recognize the value of their rational nature and to respond appropriately to that value is found in Thomas Hill’s “Servility and Self-Respect.”\textsuperscript{33} Hill argues that an individual fails to respect herself insofar as she fails to acknowledge that she has certain basic moral rights or insofar as she fails to value these rights properly; he calls such a person “servile.” What is morally objectionable about servility is that it involves a public and systematic willingness to disavow one’s moral status; Hill argues that this is incompatible with a proper regard for morality. That is, a servile person doesn’t properly respect morality. While the most obvious instances of a lack of respect for morality tend to involve violating the rights of others, the servile person’s lack of respect for morality is more subtle: it is in her acting in ways that demonstrate that she either doesn’t know or doesn’t care about her status as a moral equal. Servile people do not violate


\textsuperscript{33} Thomas Hill, “Servility and Self-Respect,” \textit{The Monist} (57), 1973: pp. 87-104.
their own rights, Hill thinks, so much as they fail to properly respect the system of morality that gives them those rights:

A person who fully respected a system of moral rights would be disposed to learn his proper place in it, to affirm it proudly, and not to tolerate abuses of it lightly. This is just the sort of disposition the servile person lacks.\textsuperscript{34}

The moral failing of servility, then, is that it is a failure to fulfill the obligation of self-respect by failing to properly respect one’s equal status under the moral law.

Hill gives several archetypal examples of servile people; the archetype most relevant to the issues at hand is what he calls the \textit{Deferential Wife}. Hill’s Deferential Wife is completely devoted to serving her husband. She doesn’t tend to form her own interests, values, or ideals; and, in the cases where she does, she doesn’t consider them to be as important as her husband’s. The Deferential Wife believes that her proper role as a woman is to serve her family, and, as such, she puts their interests before her own. Hill argues that the Deferential Wife is not blameworthy for her servility if it results from a lack of viable options, from socially fostered ignorance, or from the mistaken belief that she has a moral obligation to be servile. But, if the Deferential Wife knows what she is doing and is servile because she is too lazy or timid to change, or because she stands to gain some minor advantage by not changing, then she is blameworthy.

Regardless of whether any particular case of servility is blameworthy, Hill thinks it is morally objectionable, “at least in the sense that it ought to be discouraged, that social conditions which nourish it should be reformed, and the like.”\textsuperscript{35} And, insofar as servile behaviour represents a failure of the obligation of self-respect, Hill seems to imply that

\textsuperscript{34} Hill, “Servility and Self-Respect,” 99.

\textsuperscript{35} Hill, “Servility and Self-Respect,” 95.
servile people have an obligation to change their behaviour. But, while Hill recognizes that servility is a moral failing, he doesn’t come out and say explicitly that people have an obligation to resist this moral failing.

It would be hard to overstate the influence Hill’s work has had on how philosophers think about duties of self-respect. One thing Hill’s analysis has proven particularly useful for is articulating why self-respect is incompatible with acquiescing in one’s oppression. Bernard Boxill, for example, has used many of the themes in Hill’s work to argue that self-respecting people must protest their mistreatment at the hands of oppressors.36

Boxill argues that someone who is self-respecting must protest when she has been wronged. The point of protesting, he thinks, is not to seek sympathy or help from others, nor is it self-pityingly to affirm that one’s circumstances are deplorable or unavoidable. The point of protesting, rather, is to express “a righteous and self-respecting concern” for oneself: “in insisting on his rights, the protestor neither demands help nor claims powerlessness. He demands only noninterference.”37 Self-respect requires protest not because a protester has a reasonable hope of her protest convincing others that she has rights—Boxill recognizes that this, unfortunately, is far from guaranteed by most acts of protest, and, anyway, he doesn’t think the self-respecting person has an obligation to make others better people by showing them the error of their ways. And even if a protester were to be successful in convincing others that she has rights, this is no guarantee of protection from further injustice: “the self-respecting person cannot depend too heavily on the moral


restraint of others. [Her] self-reliance impels [her] to seek the means of self defence.”

And it’s good enough for self-defence if others merely respect her because they fear her. Because protesting is, in many cases, an ineffective means of persuading others to acknowledge that one has value or rights, the point of protest must have something to do with the effect it has on oneself, Boxill thinks.

But just what this effect is supposed to be is not entirely straightforward. After all, someone can believe perfectly consistently that she has value or rights even if she does not protest when she is treated in ways that deny this value or violate these rights: she simply has to believe that those who are mistreating her are mistaken in their beliefs about her value or her rights. And there can be good reasons to refrain from protesting: the incentives or rewards offered to those who acquiesce in their mistreatment, and the punishments attached to protesting, can tempt even self-respecting people into at least to pretending to be servile. But pretending at servility is dangerous, Boxill thinks, because it shakes someone’s confidence in her self-respect. This, then, is the point of protest: to assure oneself that one has self-respect. While protest is an “indifferent way of getting others to acknowledge and thus to confirm that one has worth,” it can be “an excellent way of confirming that one has faith in one’s worth.” This confirmation is important because self-respect is the sort of thing that one needs evidence of, lest one lose it.

[A] person with self-respect may lose it. He may not be confident of always having it. He may not even be sure that he really has it. But if he does have self-respect, he will never be unconcerned about the question of his self-respect. Necessarily he will want to retain it. … [T]he self-respecting person wants to know that he is self-respecting.


Even pretending to be servile can undermine one’s confidence in one’s value. Eventually this threatens to destroy one’s self-respect. Protest is what rights all this, Boxill thinks. A self-respecting person is driven to make his claim to self-respect unmistakable. Therefore, since nothing as unequivocally expresses what a person thinks he believes as his own emphatic statement, the … self-respecting person will declare his self-respect. He will protest. His protest affirms that he has rights. More important, it tells everyone that he believes he has rights and that he therefore claims self-respect.  

Boxill’s account of why oppressed people should protest their oppression reaches many of the same conclusions that my account does. But, despite the clear influence that Hill’s arguments have had on Boxill’s work, Boxill’s account is not explicitly Kantian. Nor does Boxill come out and say explicitly that the oppressed have an obligation to resist their oppression; his recommendations come across as more along the lines of prudential advice. Another, deeper, difference between Boxill’s work and my own is that the conclusion he argues for is significantly narrower than mine. Whereas he focuses exclusively on protesting oppression, I focus on resisting it. Protest, as Boxill seems to conceive of it, is an inherently public act: it involves a public declaration that one respects oneself. As I’ll discuss in more depth in Chapter 5, protesting is merely one of many different ways to resist oppression. When it comes to some cases of oppression, I agree with Boxill’s claim that protest is the morally appropriate course of action to take in resisting. But in other cases, as we’ll see, resisting one’s oppression by protesting publicly can have disastrous consequences. There must be ways to resist one’s oppression, I contend, that do not require one to protest publicly. Resisting oppression thus belongs to a broader category of action than protesting it.

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does. My account of the obligation to resist oppression, then, is consonant with much of what Boxill says, but I take my aims to be ultimately more ambitious than his.

Another thing Hill’s analysis has proven particularly useful for is examining the ways oppression can undermine self-respect. Someone who has picked up on Hill’s work on self-respect for these purposes is Robin Dillon. In her analysis of how social conditions can undermine self-respect, Dillon argues, with Hill, that self-respect requires that we live our lives with the understanding that we are persons who are fundamentally equal to all other persons. Self-respect also requires that we live lives that express who we are as individuals, in accordance with our ideals and commitments. Dillon also argues that self-respect requires that we properly appreciate ourselves as agents. Properly appreciating our agency means taking our responsibilities seriously, she thinks, because it is only in virtue of our agency that we have responsibilities at all. So, having respect for ourselves requires that we take to heart the importance of our responsibilities, including our responsibility to protect those features of us in virtue of which we are owed respect. But the primary importance of self-respect is that it

is inextricably connected with what is constitutive of human worth. … [S]elf-respect is respect of things with great moral significance—our personhood and standing in the moral community; our agency and capacity to be critically self-appraising, self-defining, and self-directing; our strivings to become persons it is worth being.

The importance of self-respect, Dillon thinks, is not just that it happens to be the case that without it we tend not to take care of ourselves, nor stand up for ourselves, nor pursue our

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43 Dillon, “How to Lose your Self-Respect,” 135.
commitments with determination. While it's true that self-respect does play this psychological role, Dillon argues that its primary importance goes far beyond this. She points out that some, like Rawls, have identified the significance of self-respect as chiefly psychological, where self-respect is important simply because it is necessary in order for us to be motivated to pursue our life plans. But Dillon argues that the primary importance of self-respect is much deeper than this, because “it is tightly bound up with such morally important things as personhood, rights, agency, autonomy, integrity, responsibility, identity, character.”44 That is, she argues that self-respect matters morally. She admits that self-respect is important because it is instrumental in the achievement of morally important ends (as Rawls says), but she thinks the primary importance of self-respect is that it is a constituent element of many of our most morally important features.

One thing Dillon is careful to establish is that people who lose their self-respect are not necessarily responsible or blameworthy for this loss. This is because she thinks there is a distinct political dimension to self-respect: there are social factors that are outside of an individual’s control that lie behind both self-respect and its loss. After all, self-respect clearly depends a great deal on both the direct evaluations of others and on the indirect influence of various social institutions and forms of socialization.

[A] person’s lacking self-respect is not simply a fact about her psychology but is an integral part of both her personal relationships and the social structures to which certain classes of persons are relegated and in which they are generally denied respect, thus coming to view themselves as not worthy of even their own respect.45


45 Dillon, “How to Lose your Self-Respect,” 125.
Whether or not one has self-respect is not something that is entirely within one’s control: it depends, at least in part, on the background social conditions one finds herself in. And, Dillon argues, oppressive social conditions clearly undermine, rather than bolster, the self-respect of those who are oppressed.

Dillon also argues that damaged self-respect is a gendered phenomenon—one connected directly to oppression. Women are more likely than men to have damaged self-respect, she argues; this damage is both a straightforward result of women’s subordination in a sexist society and also one of the principal means of carrying out this subordination. Damaged self-respect is a result of having our views about ourselves, our worth, and our place in the world formed in social, cultural, and political contexts that are oppressive. When these contexts are pervaded by the message that the category of persons to which we belong is inferior, this inferiority is internalized and can decimate self-respect. This lack of self-respect then functions as a means of entrenching the oppressive status quo: people will be much less likely to stand up for themselves, to assert their moral equality, or to decry infringements on their rights, when they have internalized the message that their membership in an oppressed group of people means they’re not entitled to anything better.

A clear virtue of Dillon’s analysis is that it details exactly how oppression can undermine the self-respect of those who are oppressed. Her account also gestures toward an explanation of why having self-respect is incompatible with acquiescing in one’s own oppression. Like mine, her arguments owe much to Hill’s, and are rooted firmly in the Kantian tradition. But, ultimately, Dillon’s analysis of the importance of self-respect is somewhat underdeveloped. She fails to articulate exactly what it means for self-respect to be “bound up with,” or “inextricably connected with,” morally important features of people who are oppressed. Furthermore, while she defends the importance of self-respect, and
while she shows how oppression can function to damage self-respect, like Hill, Dillon does not argue explicitly for an obligation to resist this damage. My account differs from Dillon’s, then, because this is precisely the obligation I mean to establish.

My account of the obligation to resist oppression differs from Hill’s in some ways as well. Hill, remember, identifies cases of servility as cases of failing to fulfill the obligation of self-respect, and he characterizes these failures as failures to recognize one’s equal moral status as an end-in-oneself. Because Hill’s focus is on servility rather than oppression, his account isn’t sufficiently general for my purposes. This is because it’s possible for there to be both cases of acquiescing in one’s oppression that don’t involve servility and cases of servility that don’t involve acquiescing in one’s oppression. The case of Native Companion that we considered in Chapter 1 is an example of someone who acquiesces in her oppression without being servile. Native Companion doesn’t fail to confront the men who sexually harassed her because she has failed to properly appreciate her equal moral status; she fails to confront these men because she thinks it won’t do any good. She lets these men get away with harassing her, and so acquiesces in her oppression and thus fails to fulfill the obligation of self-respect. But she is not servile. Hill’s analysis, therefore, cannot explain what is wrong with her behaviour. An example of someone who is servile but not necessarily oppressed can be found in Hill: another one of the archetypal examples of servility he considers is what he calls the *Self-Deprecator*. Hill’s Self-Deprecator is someone who thinks he is entitled to less than others, and thinks he is less important than others, because of unrelated but real individual failings on his part. Because the Self-Deprecator “feels that nothing is owed him until he has earned it and that he has earned very little,” his “acute [and accurate] awareness of his own inadequacies and failures” makes him act as if he deserves
mistreatment at the hands of others. The Self-Deprecator, then, is someone who is servile but not oppressed. The problems of servility and oppression are closely related, to be sure, but the two are conceptually distinct. Because servility isn’t inherent to acquiescing in oppression, the scope of my account of the obligation to resist oppression is broader than Hill’s. But, because not all servility is found in oppressive contexts, my account is in other ways narrower than his.

Furthermore, Hill’s focus is primarily to identify and analyse the problem: he identifies cases of servility as cases of failing to have self-respect, and he explains what’s wrong with this failure. But Hill doesn’t actually say that we have an obligation of self-respect, nor does he say much about what it would be to fulfill the obligation of self-respect in cases of servility under oppression. I intend to flesh out what respecting rational nature actually requires of us in a way that Hill does not. If you focus, as Hill does, exclusively on how acquiescing in one’s oppression is a failure to respect the value of one’s own rational nature, then you might overlook how this rational nature can actually be damaged by the oppressive forces one is acquiescing in. And I really do think that rational nature can be damaged by oppression. For this reason, the account I develop focuses on how recognizing that rational nature can be damaged by oppression brings with it an obligation not just to respect rational nature but also to protect it. Hill’s focus is on the attitudes one must have toward rational nature; my focus is on the particular actions one must take to actually protect this nature. This positive proposal—what the content of this obligation is, and how exactly it can be fulfilled—is something I take up in more detail in Chapter 5.

So I want to tell a somewhat different story, also Kantian. I argue that, if Kant is right and our rational nature has ultimate value, then we ought to protect this nature by protecting all of it, including our capacity to act rationally. Because one has an obligation to prevent damage to one’s rational nature, insofar as oppression can actually damage one’s capacity to act rationally, one has an obligation to resist one’s oppression. What I’m doing here is applying the Kantian obligation to respect rational nature in ways that haven’t been recognized before. In identifying the possibility that oppression can damage people’s rational capacities, I’ve uncovered a new class of instances that the general Kantian obligation to respect rational nature can be applied to. This application should be of special interest to feminist theorists, and to any others interested in oppression more generally.

THE VERY POSSIBILITY OF OBLIGATIONS TO THE SELF

It is a well-known feature of Kant’s practical philosophy that he makes a strong case for obligations to the self as well as to others. Kant has been so highly influential on this point that most contemporary philosophers who write about self-respect do so within the Kantian tradition. The intelligibility of the thought that one could have an obligation to respect oneself is crucial to my argument that the obligation to resist one’s own oppression is, at root, an obligation to the self. Thus Kant’s contention that we have an obligation to respect rational nature in ourselves just as much as we must respect it in others is of central importance to my project.

Kant’s justification for the obligation of self-respect, remember, goes as follows. In the Formula of Humanity, Kant asserts that as a matter of rational necessity we must recognize that the rational nature in us confers upon us a value that requires that we always be treated as an end and never merely as a means. If we want to be rational, we must
necessarily conceive of ourselves as having rational nature, and we must view this rational nature as conferring on us a value that restricts the ways in which we may be treated. And, he contends, just as we necessarily recognize this of ourselves, we must necessarily recognize it of others. Thus, Kant argues that we must treat rational nature as if it actually does have this value: rational nature exists as an objective end, or end in itself, because we necessarily conceive of it as doing so. The obligation of self-respect, then, is an obligation to recognize the value of the rational nature within us and to respond accordingly. As we saw above, Kant thinks the recognition of the value of our own rational nature gives us an obligation, not just to treat ourselves in certain ways, but also to have a certain attitude toward ourselves. For the same reason that we ought to treat ourselves as an end in itself, Kant thinks we ought to value ourselves as an end in itself. The obligation of self-respect thus requires both that we take certain actions and that we take certain attitudes toward ourselves.

But despite its importance in Kant’s moral framework, the thought that one could have an obligation to oneself is far from uncontroversial. Many philosophers have been tempted to think that there can’t be obligations to the self because there are certain dissimilarities between obligations to the self and obligations to others, or because they think there are certain peculiarities that attach to obligations to the self. The question of whether there can be obligations to the self is generally pursued in the context of the more specific question of whether a particular kind of obligation—that which arises from making promises to oneself—is intelligible.

The canonical argument against the possibility of such obligations comes from M.G. Singer, who argues against the possibility of promises to the self for two reasons.47

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Interestingly, versions of the criticisms put forth by Singer are actually anticipated by Kant, who admits that the “Concept of a Duty to Oneself Contains (at First Glance) a Contradiction” (DV 6:417). The first problem with obligations to the self that Singer points out is that, when it comes to standard cases of obligation, the party to whom the obligation is owed can release the party who owes the obligation. And, since no one can release oneself from an obligation, Singer thinks, it is therefore impossible that one could have an obligation to oneself in the first place. Kant echoes this concern in the Doctrine of Virtue:

One can … bring this contradiction to light by pointing out that the one imposing obligation (actor obligationis) could always release the one put under obligation (subjectum obligationis) from the obligation (terminus obligationis), so that (if both are one and the same subject) he would not be bound at all to a duty he lays upon himself. This involves a contradiction (DV 6:417).

Singer’s second argument for the impossibility of obligations to the self takes a form that’s very similar to his first argument. He argues that, in standard cases of obligation, if one party has an obligation to another, then the party to whom the obligation is owed has a right against the party who owes the obligation. And, since it is absurd to think that one could have a right against oneself, Singer thinks, it is therefore impossible that one could have an obligation to oneself in the first place. Kant echoes something very much like this concern in the Doctrine of Virtue as well:

If the I that imposes obligation is taken in the same sense as the I that is put under obligation, a duty to oneself is a contradictory concept. For the concept of duty contains the concept of being passively constrained (I am bound). But if the duty is a duty to myself, I think of myself as binding and so as actively constraining (I, the same subject, am imposing obligation). And the proposition that asserts a duty to myself (I ought to bind myself) would involve being bound to bind myself (a passive obligation that was still, in the same sense of the relation, also an active obligation), and hence a contradiction (DV 6:417).

But Kant thinks this contradiction is merely apparent; he takes himself to have a “Solution of This Apparent Antimony” (DV 6:417). Kant’s defence of the
possibility of obligations to the self relies on his metaphysical conception of the self. He solves the apparent contradiction that results when the person who is doing the obligating is the same person who is obligated by arguing that, in such cases, the nonmenal self obligates the phenomenal self:

When a human being is conscious of a duty to himself, he views himself, as the subject of duty, under two attributes: first as a sensible being, that is, as a human being (a member of one of the animal species), and second as an intelligible being (not merely as a being that has reason, since reason as a theoretical faculty could well be an attribute of a living corporeal being). The senses cannot attain this latter aspect of a human being; it can be cognized only in morally practical relations, where the incomprehensible property of freedom is revealed by the influence of reason on the inner lawgiving will.

Now the human being as a natural being that has reason (homo phaenomenon) can be determined by his reason, as a cause, to actions in the sensible world, and so far as the concept of obligation does not come into consideration. But the same human being thought in terms of his personality, that is, as being endowed with inner freedom (homo noumenon), is regarded as a being that can be put under obligation and, indeed, under obligation to himself (to the humanity in his own person). So the human being (taken in these two different senses) can acknowledge a duty to himself without falling into contradiction (because the concept of a human being is not thought in one and the same sense) (DV 6:417-418).

Obligations to the self are possible because the noumenal self (the aspect of the self that we know must exist, despite having no direct sensible access to it, because without it we wouldn’t be capable of freedom) obligates the phenomenal self (the aspect of the self to which we have direct sensible access), Kant argues. Now, I admit it’s not at all clear that this argument actually works. And even if it did, Kant’s metaphysical conception of the self is

48 For a discussion of why Kant’s argument in defence of imperfect duties probably doesn’t work see, e.g., Andrews Reath, “Self-Legislation and Duties to Oneself,” Southern Journal of Philosophy 36 (1997): 103-124. Reath argues that Kant’s distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal self won’t solve the problem here because Kant himself admits that it’s our noumenal self that is both “endowed with inner freedom” and “can be put under obligation.” According to Kant’s own view, then, our noumenal self both recognizes a duty and chooses whether to obey it. So even with Kant’s distinction between noumenal and phenomenal, the same sense of self—the noumenal self—is what does the obliging and is what is obliged.
admittedly controversial. I have no intention of launching into a defence of this metaphysical picture here; nothing in my account hangs on such a defence.

Luckily for those not inclined to buy into the more contentious aspects of Kant’s metaphysical framework, Thomas Hill has a defence of the possibility of obligations to the self that is less contentious (and ultimately more successful, probably) than Kant’s.\textsuperscript{49} Hill argues, contra Singer’s first argument, that there \textit{are} things one can do to release oneself from an obligation.\textsuperscript{50} If one reconsiders a promise to oneself in light of unanticipated new information, if one isn’t doing so because of anticipated temptations, and if one explicitly declares the promise cancelled, Hill argues that this constitutes a legitimate release from an obligation to oneself. Thus Singer’s argument that obligations to the self are impossible because the obligator must be able to release the obligatee from the obligation does not go through.

Hill responds to Singer’s second argument as well. Hill argues that a lot of the force of this second argument (that one can’t have a right against oneself) comes from the first argument (that one can’t release oneself from an obligation). As we’ve just seen, Hill takes himself to have a response to the first argument, so he’s understandably not terribly moved by the second. Furthermore, while he admits that it might be a bit weird to talk of violating

\begin{footnote}{49} For other defences of the possibility of duties to the self that are more explicitly wedded to Kantianism, see, e.g., Lara Denis, “Kant’s Ethics and Duties to Oneself,” \textit{Pacific Philosophical Quarterly} 78 (1997): 321-348; Margaret Paton, “A Reconsideration of Kant’s Treatment of Duties to Oneself,” \textit{The Philosophical Quarterly} 40 (1990): 222-233; and Jens Timmerman, “Kantian Duties to the Self, Explained and Defended,” \textit{Philosophy} 81 (2006): 505-530. These commentators all agree that there \textit{is} a sense in which there are two selves involved when it comes to duties to the self: these two senses of the self are just the self understood as the \textit{legislator} of the moral law and the self understood as the \textit{subject} of the moral law.
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one’s own rights or pressing one’s rights against oneself, Hill thinks this isn’t enough to undermine the conceptual possibility of promises to the self. Hill admits that, unlike promises to others, promises to the self are usually not morally binding. Still, he thinks promises to the self can be more than just a device to make performance of a particular action more likely. Hill ends his defence of the possibility of obligations to the self by gesturing toward what he thinks is a fruitful direction for future discussion of these obligations: he thinks “the ultimate ground of what is most plausibly called an obligation to oneself is self-respect.”\(^{51}\) This should come as no surprise, given Hill’s Kantian commitments.

I take Hill’s refutation of Singer’s arguments to be convincing and have no further arguments of my own to offer. So, despite the apparent dissimilarities between obligations to the self and obligations to others, and despite the apparent peculiarities that attach to obligations to the self, I take it that obligations to the self are nevertheless possible. And because obligations to the self are possible, this means the obligation to resist oppression can be an obligation someone has to herself.

**Objection: This is an Obligation to Others, not the Self**

Even if obligations to the self are possible, one might think that we should still try to make sense of why people ought not to accept their oppression by appealing only to the effects on others of doing so. Such accounts do have their merits. After all, no one is oppressed in a social vacuum. The extent to which an individual goes along with her own oppression surely affects the oppression of others who share her social category. Simply put, accepting one’s oppression can make oppression appear acceptable. And making oppression appear

\(^{51}\) Hill, “Promises to Oneself,” 154.
acceptable is no better than endorsing it: sending the message that it’s permissible to oppress me in virtue of my being a woman sends the message that it’s permissible to oppress others in virtue of their being women, too. Most philosophers who argue that the oppressed have an obligation to resist their own oppression give arguments that revolve around the duties one has to other members of one’s oppressed group, not around the duties one has to oneself.

The clearest proponent of this view is Ann Cudd, who argues that what is wrong when women acquiesce in their own oppression is that doing so strengthens sexist institutions that harm all women:

*By participating in an oppressive situation, one lends some strength and stability to it, perhaps even legitimates it to some degree.* This point is crucial, and deserves some elaboration. Institutions are coordinated actions of individual people. Part of what makes institutions so effective at coordinating is they embody the common knowledge of what people will do in certain types of situations, and this in turn narrows down the range of choices of actions one is to perform to a manageable number. This common knowledge becomes stronger and more stable the more times that the expected actions are performed. So if an oppressive institution requiring the actions of the oppressed to be of a certain sort … is effective in so coordinating actions in a given case, then it becomes an even greater expectation on the part of others that they will perform the required actions, as well. One has only two options in such cases: resist or strengthen the unjust institution. Thus, in cases of oppression by choice failing to resist harms others.⁵²

But Cudd actually thinks that the oppressed do not have a general obligation to resist their own oppression. She argues that in many cases resisting one’s oppression is *supererogatory*. Cudd points out that many oppressed people do not fully understand their oppression because oppressive social institutions are often justified by appeal to tradition or divine command or spurious claims about the natural order. Furthermore, the situations the oppressed are in are usually coercive: they’ve been unfairly and unavoidably put in their

oppressive situations; they haven’t chosen them freely. For these reasons—the absence of knowledge and the presence of coercion—Cudd thinks it is often the case that the oppressed are not obligated to resist their own oppression. And she argues that there are other practical considerations that tell against this obligation as well. Oppression often pervades the lives of the oppressed to the point where it would be impossible to resist it all at once, she claims. In addition, effective resistance of oppression sometimes requires many oppressed people to act in concert with each other: it’s often not possible to make a difference alone. So, because the lack of knowledge and the presence of coercion generally mitigate moral obligation, and because it is sometimes just not practically possible to resist one’s own oppression, Cudd argues that there’s good reason to think that in most cases resisting one’s own oppression is at best supererogatory.

The only time someone who is oppressed does have an obligation to resist her oppression, Cudd thinks, is when she has chosen to acquiesce in her oppression and where this acquiescence harms other members of her oppressed group. Remember, Cudd points out that other people can be harmed by an oppressed person’s participation in an oppressive situation because this participation can strengthen, stabilize, and even legitimate the oppressive institutions that ultimately harm all members of an oppressed group. So, because one’s choices to acquiesce can negatively affect the life prospects of others, these cases of acquiescing in one’s oppression are morally criticisable. Thus, Cudd thinks the oppressed sometimes do have an obligation to resist their oppression, at least insofar as failing to do otherwise harms others. But it’s important to notice that this obligation to resist one’s own oppression is an obligation one has to others, not an obligation one has to oneself.

I suspect that Cudd’s underlying motivation for this claim—that if there is an obligation to resist oppression it must be an obligation one has to others and not to
oneself—is rooted in skepticism about the very possibility of duties to the self. As we just saw, Cudd is certainly not alone in this skepticism. But this view about the other-oriented nature of duty remains merely implicit in her account. Cudd’s explicit justification for finding it implausible that people could have an obligation to themselves to resist their own oppression appeals to other—generally more practically-oriented—considerations. In Chapter 5, I’ll argue that these considerations are insufficient to undermine the possibility that the obligation to resist oppression could be an obligation one has to oneself. But right now I want to focus on other reasons for thinking that an exclusively other-oriented account of the obligation to resist oppression, such as Cudd’s, cannot capture everything of moral significance under oppressive social conditions.

Now, I think there is much to agree with in accounts like Cudd’s. It seems obviously right that part of the source of the obligation to resist one’s own oppression is that doing so (or failing to do so) affects others in one’s social group. I’m not denying that oppressed people have an obligation to other members of their oppressed group to resist their oppression. But, unlike Cudd’s account, the account I am advocating emphasizes that, in addition to the obligations one has to others, one has an obligation to oneself. One important reason for insisting that there is also an obligation to the self here is that doing so solves a problem that can’t be solved if the obligation to resist one’s oppression is merely an obligation to others: specifically, identifying what is wrong with servility or certain gendered norms of self-sacrifice.

Actual oppressive societies consistently demand this kind of sacrifice from those who are oppressed. For example, sacrificing one’s interests (including those things that

53 Indeed, Cudd has confirmed to me that this skepticism is what motivates her view here. (Personal communication with the author.)
make one’s rational nature possible) in favour of the interests of those for whom one is responsible for caring is a distinctively feminine virtue. This phenomenon is what Stanton was referring to in the statement we saw above, where she claimed that that “self-development is a higher duty than self-sacrifice.” Stanton is also purported to have claimed that “the thing which most retards and militates against women’s self-development is self-sacrifice.” She is responding here to what were then the predominant cultural notions of feminine virtue, which valorized devotion and self-abnegation as ideal traits of character for women. Convincing women to sacrifice their own interests in order to further the interests of others is a hallmark of sexist oppression. It has long been women’s traditional role to foster and develop the rational nature of future generations, even at the expense of their own rational nature. This amounts to nothing less than exploitation.  

Or, to put things in the context of the issues I’ve been raising, these oppressive social norms valourize precisely the acquiescence that I’ve been arguing that people have an obligation to resist.

I contend that Cudd’s account ultimately doesn’t have the resources to fully explain what is wrong with this kind of exploitation. On models like hers, where the obligation to resist one’s oppression is fundamentally an obligation one has to others, what’s wrong with this self-sacrifice of one’s rational nature is just that it harms other members of one’s oppressed group by making it more likely that they’ll have to make similar sacrifices. But

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then what’s wrong with these other people’s self-sacrifice? Nothing, in itself. The only thing that’s wrong with this further self-sacrifice is that it makes it more likely that other members of one’s oppressed group will have to make these sorts of sacrifices. This regress is vicious, I contend, because it fails to capture everything that is wrong with gendered norms of self-sacrifice.55

This problem is perhaps best illustrated by comparing the harms of gendered norms of self-sacrifice with other harms of sexist oppression. Think back to the case of Native Companion’s sexual harassment we considered in Chapter 1. There we saw that, like acquiescing in gendered norms of self-sacrifice, one of the harms of not resisting one’s own sexual harassment is that it sends the message that it’s both permissible harass other women and reasonable to expect acquiescence from them. This means that the obligation to resist sexual harassment is, at least in part, an obligation one has to other women. But explaining the wrongness of accepting sexual harassment at least in part by appealing to the harms that accrue to other women isn’t subject to the same regress problem as explaining the wrongness of gendered norms of self-sacrifice in these terms. This is because there is an independent account of why sexual harassment is wrong that is readily available. As I’ve argued elsewhere, sexual harassment stems from sexual objectification; and sexual objectification is morally problematic because by treating women as things rather than persons it demeans their status as moral equals.56 Unlike something like sexual harassment, self-sacrifice isn’t inherently morally problematic. In fact, it’s usually a virtue. Being willing to sacrifice one’s interests (including those things that make one’s rational nature possible)
for the sake of others can be one of the noblest forms of altruism. Self-sacrifice, furthermore, is often associated with other positive qualities such as compassion, supportiveness, generosity, and attentiveness to others’ needs. So it’s not clear that accounts like Cudd’s, which would explain what is wrong with acquiescing in gendered norms of self-sacrifice solely in terms of the harms that accrue to other women, have an independent account of what is wrong with this sort of self-sacrifice at their disposal.

One might reply, on behalf of accounts like Cudd’s, that although self-sacrifice isn’t wrong per se, the specific sort of self-sacrifice that gendered norms require of women is morally problematic because, on balance, these norms harm women more than they benefit the people for whom women make sacrifices. This would be, in effect, an independent account of what is wrong with gendered norms of self-sacrifice. And the availability of this account would halt the regress problem because the harm of gendered norms of self-sacrifice wouldn’t just be that they make it more likely that all women will be required to make these sacrifices, it would be that ultimately they do more harm than good.

But this account will not do. Norms like these remain in place for a reason, after all. Gendered norms of self-sacrifice, and the sexist status quo they help perpetuate, benefit some people a whole lot. And many of these benefits have to do with people’s rational natures. These norms benefit many men because, for example, the social institution of the traditional family is arranged so that men are often the individuals whose interests women sacrifice their own interests in favour of. As we saw in Chapter 2, one of the effects of this arrangement is that men’s rational natures benefit at the expense of women’s. These norms also benefit many men because the interactions between the social institutions of the family and the workplace mean that many men are able to enjoy a relative advantage in their careers that is the result of not having to compete on a level playing field with women who are
burdened with the care of needy dependents. Again, this can give men the chance to foster their rational natures at women’s expense. These norms also benefit the children to whom women usually have a deep emotional attachment. Here, too, women sacrifice their rational natures to foster the rational natures of others. Finally, these norms benefit society in general by, for example, sustaining social institutions that allow it to not have to pick up much of the collective tab when it comes to caring for future generations.\(^{57}\)

Injustice can be terribly efficient: sexist social institutions, and the norms that sustain them, remain in place, in part, because they are good at serving the interests of a great number of people.\(^{58}\) There’s no reason to think, then, that the benefits of these norms that accrue to others don’t outweigh the harms of these norms that accrue to women. We should be extremely wary of trying to make the immorality of gendered norms of self-sacrifice hinge on the all-things-considered balance of benefits and harms, because there’s a real chance that this calculation might turn out to show that, so much the worse for the women who are pressured to sacrifice their interests in accordance with these norms, things are better off for everyone for them doing so. Furthermore, I contend, even if the calculation didn’t go this way, and it turned out that the balance of harms to women caused by gendered norms of self-sacrifice did outweigh the benefits to others, there would still be something wrong with a social norm that systematically required certain members of society,

\(^{57}\) It’s worth saying that I don’t think any of these arrangements are inherently problematic. But the criticism here is not a criticism of individual arrangements; it’s a criticism of social institutions and the norms that make it difficult or impossible for people to arrange their lives in any other way.

\(^{58}\) Sexist social arrangements, and the norms that sustain them, also remain in place, in part, because they best serve the interests of the members of society who have the power to change things if it were in their interest to do so. But this point doesn’t bear directly on the issue at hand.
but not others, disproportionately to sacrifice their interests. We’ll see why this is so in a moment.

But first, consider a second potential reply on behalf of accounts like Cudd’s. According to this reply, although self-sacrifice isn’t wrong per se, what’s wrong with gendered norms of self-sacrifice is that these norms legitimate or reinforce both the idea that women’s interests matter less than the interests of others, and the related idea that women should be expected to sacrifice their interests for the sake of others. Legitimating ideas like these would make every woman more likely to be exploited in other ways as well, regardless of whether she actually chose to make these sacrifices herself. It would also make it difficult for women to choose not to make these sacrifices. When self-sacrifice is an option that is freely chosen, it is a virtue. But when self-sacrifice is socially expected or required—when there are serious negative consequences attached to failing to sacrifice one’s interests—this transforms what should be a virtue into something very different. Self-sacrifice can’t be said to be freely chosen when there are sanctions for not doing it. Even in a society like ours, where feminism’s successes allow many women to enjoy something approaching relative equality with men in many spheres of their lives, women who refuse to sacrifice their interests for their families will almost inevitably face the judgement (from others and from themselves) that they are selfish. They’ll be told, implicitly and explicitly, that they are bad wives and bad mothers. Self-sacrifice isn’t a virtue for women so much as it’s an expectation. And self-sacrifice isn’t a virtue when one doesn’t really have an option not to do it. You might think self-sacrifice is, intuitively, something that should be supererogatory, not obligatory. The feminine “virtue” of self-sacrifice, then, is actually a justification for, and mechanism of, exploitation. This exploitation stems from the idea that because women’s interests matter less than the interests of others, women should be willing to sacrifice their
interests for the sake of others. And, remember, many of the sacrifices women are expected to make are sacrifices that directly affect their rational natures. This, then, is a different independent account of what is wrong with gendered norms of self-sacrifice. And the availability of this account would halt the regress problem because the harm of gendered norms of self-sacrifice wouldn’t just be that they make it more likely that all women will be required to make these sacrifices, it would be that they make it more likely that all women will be exploited.

But this account will not do either. While I think it’s true, as a matter of fact, that gendered norms of self-sacrifice do have these consequences—that they contribute to the likelihood of women being exploited—this isn’t sufficient to explain everything that’s wrong with these norms. For imagine if they didn’t have these exploitative consequences. I contend that even in a world where gendered norms of self-sacrifice didn’t have these consequences there would still be something wrong with some but not all people systematically being required to make certain sacrifices.

This is because there is something wrong, in itself, with a social system that is set up in such a way that it consistently demands self-sacrifice from some but not all of its members. This is especially so when it comes to self-sacrifices that affect people’s rational natures. Unequal expectations of self-sacrifice transform what should be an individual virtue into a demand that is incompatible with the equal respect for individuals that morality requires. A norm like this—one that is systematically disproportionate and assymetrical in the demands that it makes on individuals—is incompatible with liberal justice because such a norm, in effect, prioritizes the interests of the group over the interests of the individuals that make up that group. Martha Nussbaum articulates the impermissibility of this beautifully in *Sex and Social Justice*. 

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For the liberal, … the demands of a collectivity or a relation should not be made the basic goal of politics: collectivities, such as the state and even the family, are composed of individuals, who never do fuse, who always continue to have their separate brains and voices and stomachs, however much they love one another. Each of these is separate, and each of these is an end. Liberalism holds that the flourishing of human beings taken one by one is both analytically and normatively prior to the flourishing of the state or the nation or the religious group: analytically, because such entities do not really efface the separate reality of individual lives; normatively because the recognition of that separateness is held to be a fundamental fact for ethics, which should recognize each separate entity as an end not as a means to the ends of others.59

If individual people freely choose to sacrifice their interests for the sake of others in their group, this needn’t be morally problematic. (It could, in fact, be virtuous.) I’ll even concede that if everyone in a group is equally required to make certain sacrifices for the survival or flourishing of the group, this might not be strictly compatible with the liberal principle just articulated, but the egalitarianism behind such an arrangement makes it at least conceivably morally justifiable. But if only some people are required to sacrifice their interests for the sake of the group, or if some people are required systematically to sacrifice their interests disproportionately, this is incompatible with the equal respect for individuals that morality requires. And this is particularly pressing when it comes to the self-sacrifice of those interests that affect people’s rational natures.

There can be no justification for asymmetrical or disproportionate norms of self-sacrifice, I contend. But accounts such as Cudd’s, accounts that explain the wrongness of acquiescing in gendered norms of self-sacrifice solely in terms of the harms that accrue to other women, cannot adequately accommodate this intuition because they cannot categorically rule out the permissibility of such norms. Because Cudd characterizes the obligation to resist oppression solely as an obligation that oppressed people have to other

members of their oppressed group, she’s unable to fully explain why these norms are problematic. Only if the obligation to resist oppression is, at least in part, an obligation that people have to themselves can we make complete sense of what’s wrong with this kind of exploitation.

**Another Possibility: This is an Obligation to Respect Rational Nature in General**

I’ve been arguing here that the obligation to respect one’s rational nature and thus to resist one’s oppression must be, at least in part, an obligation to the self. We just saw that this obligation can’t be solely an obligation to others, because then we can’t explain why gendered norms of self-sacrifice are morally problematic. We might think that the relevant obligation here is a general obligation to respect rational nature wherever one might find it, in oneself or in others. But unless we’re careful to articulate what this generality means in a very particular way, this characterization of the obligation will fail for reasons that parallel the reasons why the obligation-to-others characterization of this obligation failed. It will turn out that, to get around this problem, the obligation to resist one’s oppression must be, at least in part, an obligation to the self.

We just saw that condemning the exploitation of gendered norms of self-sacrifice requires ruling out the possibility that one could be obligated to sacrifice one’s own rational nature, or allow oneself to be oppressed, to increase or preserve the rational nature of others. If the relevant obligation here is simply to protect and foster rational nature wherever one might find it, then there is a concern that it will make no difference whose rational nature one is protecting or fostering. Now, I think there very well might be a general obligation to protect and foster everyone’s rational nature. (And, of course, there’s
clearly an obligation to fight oppression that is a general obligation to fight any social injustice.) But if the general obligation to protect and foster rational nature is interpreted as simply an obligation to maximize rational nature then, by itself, the general obligation to protect and foster rational nature wouldn’t rule out the possibility that oppressed people could be obligated to sacrifice their own rational nature for the sake of others’ rational natures. According to a maximising interpretation of the obligation to respect rational nature, fulfilling this obligation would just be a matter of creating more rational capacities and abilities wherever one could. So, for example, in situations where gendered norms of self-sacrifice encourage women to forfeit their rational nature for the sake of the many people for whom they are responsible for caring, a maximizing view’s solution to this conflict between a woman’s own interests and the interests of her care-subjects is clear: their multiple interests trump her single interest. Such a woman would thus have an obligation to foster the rational nature of others at the expense of her own. But this can’t be right. This would be condoning exploitation. So the general obligation to respect rational nature can’t be general in this maximising way.

Luckily for the Kantian, there’s a way around this problem. Remember, in calling rational nature an independently-existing end, rather than an end to be effected, Kant argues that rational nature isn’t something that we have an obligation to try to produce when it does not yet exist, but that when it already exists it is valuable and thus must be respected. On the Kantian picture, the appropriate response to the recognition that people have value in virtue of their rational nature isn’t that we must try to maximize instances of that value (by, say, creating as many new people with rational nature as possible). Rather, the appropriate response to the recognition that people have value in virtue of their rational nature is that we
must have a certain attitude of respect toward people who already have this nature.\textsuperscript{60} So while Kant does think the obligation to respect rational nature in general is the fundamental obligation here, this doesn’t commit him to the unintuitive consequences of the maximizing view just discussed. This is because the obligation to respect one’s own rational nature demands just as much attention as the obligation to respect the rational nature of others.

This is not to say that the obligation to protect and foster one’s own rational nature necessarily \textit{trumps} the obligation to protect and foster the rational nature of others. But it is to say that the obligation to respect oneself in this way is at least as important as the obligation to respect others. Both the obligation to respect oneself and the obligation to respect others are thus special instances of the same kind of obligation: the obligation to respect and protect rational nature wherever it is found. Inconveniently for this interpretation, Kant actually insinuates in some places that the obligation of self-respect is more important than the obligation to respect others. At the very least, he claims that failures to respect one’s own rational nature are worse than failures to respect others’.\textsuperscript{61} But, ultimately, it’s not clear what his argument for this claim is. In any case, all we need from the Kantian picture is that there \textit{is} an obligation to respect oneself, and that it’s at least on a par with obligations to others. This much follows because the fundamental Kantian obligation is to respect rational nature in general, and the obligation to respect rational nature in particular individuals—whether in oneself or in others—derives from this more basic obligation. This means that the obligation to respect one’s own rational nature is equally as

\textsuperscript{60} Robert Nozick refers to this Kantian tenet—that people have inviolable rights that restrict the ways they may be treated—as a \textit{side-constraints-view}. See Robert Nozick, \textit{Anarchy, State, and Utopia}, (USA: Basic Books, 1974), especially 29-35.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{LE} 117-119, 121, 125; \textit{DV} 6:429-430.
important as the obligation to respect others’ rational nature. This stands in contrast to accounts like Cudd’s, which explains the wrongness of acquiescing in one’s oppression solely in terms of the harms to others, where the obligation to respect the rational nature of others could end up outweighing the obligation to respect one’s own rational nature.

The Kantian view successfully captures the nature of this situation in a way that the maximizing view does not. On the Kantian picture, situations where someone can’t foster or protect the rational nature of others without sacrificing their own rational nature are moral dilemmas. The general obligation to respect rational nature requires both that one respect one’s own rational nature and that one respect the rational nature of others. In situations where these two obligations conflict, one is faced with a moral dilemma. And this seems like the correct characterization of the moral status of such situations. It’s not as if the appropriate response to the sorts of situations we’ve been considering, where gendered norms of self-sacrifice encourage women to forfeit their interests for the sake of others, would be to counsel women to abandon the interests of their children or others they’re responsible for caring for. This is a legitimate conflict of interests: the interests of the people women are responsible for matter just as much as the interests of women themselves. So we don’t want a view that has it that women’s obligations to themselves necessarily outweigh the obligations they have to others. All we need to do here is be able to explain what’s morally problematic about oppressive social structures that regularly force women into these dilemmas, and that exploit them by making them willing to sacrifice their interests for the sake of others. And the Kantian view I’ve defended can accomplish this.
Objection: This Account Has Things Exactly Backward

A final objection I’d like to consider here is motivated by certain concerns that standpoint theorists have raised. The central insight behind standpoint theory is what Alison Wylie has called an “inversion thesis:”

those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects. They may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience.62

This inversion thesis suggests that people who live at the margins of society—people who are oppressed in virtue of, say, their class, race, gender, or sexual orientation—are actually better situated to know certain things. These people’s marginalization makes them likely be discredited epistemically because they are often seen to be uneducated, or uninformed, or unreliable. But marginalization can actually confer epistemic advantage, standpoint theorists argue. Living one’s life at the margins of society can put someone in a position to know things that more privileged people usually do not know, or things they have a vested interested in not knowing, or things they have a vested interest in systematically ignoring or denying. This is especially true when it comes to knowledge about oppression: because oppressed people do not have an interest in maintaining an oppressive status quo, it’s easier for them to understand how oppression works. This is so because, some standpoint theorists claim, oppressed people have a great deal of incentive to figure out how the system that is oppressing them works so they can better determine how to dismantle it. It’s also so because oppressed people have no psychological incentive to deceive themselves about the

roles they play in an oppressive social system because they’re not the ones reaping unfair benefits from such a system.

The sorts of epistemic advantages that a marginalized standpoint can confer that Wylie discusses include the fact that marginalization (1) can give someone who is oppressed *access to evidence* that is not easily available to non-oppressed people; and (2) it can give someone who is oppressed *inferential acuity* in picking out patterns or connections that is not easily available to non-oppressed people. The kinds of evidence that oppressed people have access to generally have to do with things that comparatively privileged people can afford to ignore—for example, the knowledge of the minute details of what goes into maintaining people’s physical well-being and their private home spaces that is acquired by those responsible for domestic labour that we’ll consider in the Appendix below. The knowledge of these sorts of details can provide insight into the mechanisms of oppression that is not available to those whose privilege allows them to assume that this work will be taken care of for them. And it’s not just that oppressed people have access to certain bits of information that more privileged people are not likely to have access to; oppressed people can also actually develop certain inferential skills in understanding the dynamics of oppression that more privileged people are unlikely to have. Oppressed people are thus more likely to understand how oppression affects them—socially, economically, psychologically—and also how it affects more privileged members of their society.

Given these considerations brought to light by standpoint theorists, then, you might think that my account has things exactly backward. I’ve argued, remember, that the reason people have an obligation to resist their oppression is that oppression damages people’s

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rational capacities. This damage can make oppressed people act in practically irrational ways. But if we take seriously the concerns raised by standpoint theorists, then it’s not the members of oppressed groups who are in danger of acting irrationally, it’s the members of oppressor groups. Furthermore, it might be charged that because my account focuses on the ways oppression can damage people’s rational capacities, it is, in effect, guilty of carrying on the tradition of epistemically discrediting people who are oppressed.

To respond to this objection, I want to emphasize certain clarifications of standpoint theory that theorists such as Wylie have been careful to articulate. Early standpoint theorists often said things to suggest that marginalized standpoints are universally epistemically advantageous. Marxist standpoint theorists, for example, argued that one’s social position with respect to material labour necessarily determines one’s epistemic position, and the marginalized position of the proletariat gives them epistemic advantages over the bourgeoisie because their ability to understand their exploitation is not clouded by a motivation to maintain a status quo from which they do not benefit. Feminist standpoint theorists such as Nancy Hartsock, for example, argued that women’s experiences surrounding childrearing and other forms of domestic labour result in epistemic perspectives that are systematically different between men and women, and that women’s is one that universally confers epistemic advantages in understanding patriarchal institutions. But it’s a mistake, Wylie claims, to think that the epistemic advantages of marginalization are

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64 Thanks to members of the audiences at the University of Dayton’s 2008 Richard R. Baker Colloquium on the topic of “Building Coalitions Across Difference,” and the Society for Analytical Feminism’s 2008 conference at the University of Kentucky, for raising versions of this objection.

automatic, or that they are all-encompassing. While not denying that the marginalization that results from oppression can confer certain epistemic advantages, Wylie points out that oppression can sometimes put people at an epistemic disadvantage as well. Oppressed people often lack access to formal education, for example, and this deprivation can affect the kinds of information they have access to, the kinds of theoretical or explanatory tools they have at their disposal, and their ability to develop various analytical skills of reasoning. Many of the harms to oppressed people’s rational capacities that I’ve discussed above are also examples of the ways that oppression can put oppressed people at an epistemic disadvantage. Harming someone’s capacity for instrumental or teleological rationality, for example, will affect her ability to acquire certain pieces of knowledge. There are, in short, things that oppressed people will not be able to know because of the effects of oppression on their rational capacities.

In agreeing with Wylie here, I’m perhaps ultimately just reasserting my claim that oppression harms people’s rational capacities. But I’m also insisting that this claim is not in conflict with the tenets of standpoint epistemology, properly understood. Standpoint epistemologists need not exaggerate the epistemic advantages of oppression. Focusing on the ways oppression harms oppressed people’s rational capacities risks contributing to the tradition of epistemically discrediting these people, I’ll admit. But this is a risk I’m willing to take, for the only alternative is to pretend that these harms aren’t really there. Ignoring these harms won’t make them go away. But identifying them, and working to eradicate them, might.
CONCLUSION

I have argued that oppressed people have an obligation to resist their oppression and that this obligation is an instance of a larger species of obligation: to protect, foster, and, ultimately, to respect people’s rational nature. In particular, I argued that women have an obligation to resist sexist oppression. To establish this end, I gave a Kantian account of the general obligation to respect rational nature and showed how oppression harms the rational natures of the oppressed. I then argued that insofar as oppression has this effect on one’s own rational nature, one is obligated to resist one’s own oppression. This is an obligation to protect and foster certain morally valuable aspects of one’s moral agency that are undermined by oppressive social conditions. I then argued that explaining the obligation to resist one’s oppression merely in terms of the obligations one has to others can’t make sense of why the exploitation that arises from certain gendered obligations of self-sacrifice is morally problematic. This tells in favour of thinking that at least part of the obligation to resist one’s own oppression has to do with obligations one has to oneself.
INTERLUDE
A FEMINIST DEFENCE OF KANT

In the chapters that follow, I look at what I take to be the two most pressing objections to my Kantian argument for why people have an obligation to resist their oppression. But before moving on to consider these objections, I think it’s worth saying something about why I, as a feminist, find it appropriate to use a Kantian framework to analyze obligations under oppression. I won’t deny that Kant says some horrifically misogynistic things about women, particularly in peripheral works such as the *Anthropology*.  

1 “Nature was concerned about the preservation of the embryo and implanted fear into the woman’s character, a fear of physical injury and a timidity towards similar dangers. On the basis of this weakness, the woman legitimately asks for masculine protection” (*Anthropology from a Practical Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 219. The *Anthropology* will hereafter referred to as “A”.

2 “[Scholarly women] use their books somewhat like a watch, that is, they wear the watch so it can be noticed that they have one, although it is usually broken or does not show the correct time” (A 221).

3 “A woman who has a head full of Greek, like Mme. Dacier, or carries on fundamental controversies about mechanics, like the Marquise du Châtelet, might as well even have a beard, for perhaps that would express more obviously the mien of profundity for which she strives” (*Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans John T. Goldwait (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), sect. 3, p. 78). The *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* will hereafter be referred to as “O”.

4 “[Women’s philosophy is] not to reason, but to sense. … I hardly believe that the fairer sex is capable of principles” (O 132-33). Tempering this somewhat, Marcia Baron points out that Kant adds to this claim that “these are also extremely rare in the male” (O 231). Marcia Baron, “Kantian Ethics and Claims of Detachment” *Feminist Interpretations of Kant*, ed. Robin May Schott (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) 166, note 1.

5 “[A] woman makes no secret in wishing that she might rather be a man, so that she could give larger and freer latitude to her inclinations; no man, however, would want to be a woman” (A 222).
among the feminist philosophers who think there is no reason to insist that these anthropological views infect Kant’s central philosophical views. It comes as a surprise to no one that the society in which Kant lived was deeply sexist (and racist, and classist, etc.); that this sexism is sometimes apparent in the works of someone writing against such background social conditions should be just as unsurprising, I contend.

It turns out that there is only one place where explicit misogyny creeps into the central works of Kant’s practical philosophy. In a passage from the *Doctrine of Right*, Kant claims that women (along with anyone who is “an apprentice in the service of a merchant or artisan; a domestic servant (as distinguished from a civil servant); [or] a minor (naturaliter vel civiliter)” *(DR 6:314-315))* “lack civil personality”—they lack both the ability and the right to participate in civil society, and are thus “passive citizens” who are “mere underlings of the commonwealth because they have to be under the direction or protection of other individuals, and so do not possess civil independence” *(DR 6:314)*. This passage is deplorable for a number of reasons, but I contend that it can be explained as a reflection of the social mores of Kant’s time. And I think it’s worth noting that Kant goes on to insist, in this same passage, that laws must never be passed that are “contrary to the natural laws of freedom and of the equality of everyone in the people corresponding to this freedom, namely that anyone can work his way up from this passive condition to an active one” *(DR 6:314-315)*.

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6:315). Even while he (inexcusably) endorsed some of the most despicable social norms and institutions of his time, Kant recognized that the tenets of his theory committed him to the view that people are fundamentally equal and deserve to be treated as such. So while Kant himself was no feminist, I contend that the resources exist within Kant’s work to support a robustly feminist moral theory.

Many feminist philosophers, however, have argued that Kantianism is fundamentally ill-suited for feminist theorizing.7 One of the best of these critics is Martha Nussbaum. The problem with Kantianism, Nussbaum has argued, lies in the fact that “for Kant, human dignity and our moral capacity, dignity’s source, are radically separate from the natural world.”8 According to the Kantian picture of human nature, we are fundamentally split beings, simultaneously rational and animal. This splitting of the person into animal and rational is seriously problematic, Nussbaum thinks, for at least four reasons.

First, it ignores the fact that our dignity is just the dignity of a certain sort of animal. It is the animal sort of dignity, and that very sort of dignity could not be possessed by a being who was not mortal and vulnerable, just as the beauty of a cherry tree in bloom could not be possessed by a diamond. …

Second, the split wrongly denies that animality can itself have a dignity; thus it leads us to slight aspects of our own lives that have worth, and to distort our relation to the other animals. Third, it makes us think of the core of ourselves as self-sufficient, not in need of the gifts of fortune; in so thinking we greatly distort the nature of our own morality and rationality, which are thoroughly material and animal themselves; we learn to ignore the fact that disease, old age, and accident can impede the moral and rational functions,

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just as much as other animal functions. Fourth, it makes us think of ourselves as a-temporal. We forget that the usual human lifecycle brings with it periods of extreme dependency, in which our functioning is very similar to that enjoyed by the mentally or physically handicapped throughout their lives.9

Nussbaum contends that this split “goes wrong in both directions: it suggests … that our rationality is independent of our vulnerable animality; and it also suggests that animality, and non-human animals, lack intelligence, are just brutish and ‘dumb.’”10 Both wrong directions are morally problematic. It’s the first wrong direction, however, that she thinks makes Kantianism particularly inadequate for feminist purposes.

Nussbaum’s complaint with the Kantian view of human nature is that it profoundly misrepresents the sorts of creatures we are. For Kant our “animality subserve[s] our rationality.”11 But there is a dignity, Nussbaum thinks, even in those parts of us that have nothing to do with our rationality, and the Kantian picture that locates every bit of our value in our rationality captures none of this. This misrepresentation of human nature, she thinks, encourages contemptuousness toward the inevitable stages of our lives in which we are dependent on others (including infancy, childhood, and elderly disability). And this contemptuousness, aside from being bad for its own sake, has implications for women in particular.

Nussbaum focuses on the fact that, for Kant, our rational nature and our animal nature “are conceptually independent, and [rational nature] is not understood in terms of

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Kant, like most other theorists in the social contract tradition, subscribes to what Nussbaum calls the “fiction of competent adulthood.” According to this fiction, people are fundamentally free, equal, and independent. As Seyla Benhabib has put the point, this fiction of competent adulthood postulates “a strange world: it is one in which individuals are grown up before they have been born; in which boys are men before they have been children; a world where neither mother, nor sister, nor wife exist.”

Now, Nussbaum agrees that people who actually are competent adults should, of course, generally be treated as if they are free, equal, and independent. But she points out that no one is born free, equal, or independent; and no one remains this way forever. Each of us is asymmetrically dependent on other people for large parts of our lives. When these facts of human dependency are ignored, or relegated to the periphery of a theorist’s conception of the human condition, it’s inevitable that the work of caring for dependent people will be taken for granted and that those responsible for this work will be at risk of exploitation. Kantianism’s failure to respond appropriately to these facts of asymmetrical dependency is thus of concern to feminism because “in every part of the world, women do a large part of this work, usually without pay, and often without recognition that it is work. They are often thereby handicapped in other functions of life.” Kant’s central focus on rationality as that which is of fundamental moral importance is therefore problematic for

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feminism because, among other things, this way of thinking about human beings will tend to lead to women’s exploitation.

Now, I think Nussbaum is right about Kant’s split between animal and rational in at least the following sense. It’s true that Kant thinks we are, in an important sense, fundamentally distinct from (and, ultimately, morally superior to) the rest of nature. Other animals are capable of acting only from instinct, Kant thinks; this makes these animals bound by the mechanical laws of nature always to act in predictable ways. Rational animals like us, however, are not bound like this. We are free. We are fundamentally separate from nature in this respect, then, because we have the capacity to make free choices about what we do. Regardless of what our more animalistic inclinations might tempt us to do, we are always capable of denying these inclinations and choosing to act out of duty. It’s this capacity to act freely, in accordance with the moral law, that Kant thinks makes us candidates for having the ultimate moral value. Nussbaum is right, then, that on the Kantian picture our animality is valuable primarily insofar as it makes our rationality possible.

A criticism that’s related to Nussbaum’s concerns about Kant’s privileging of the rational over the animal has to do with his privileging of the rational over the emotional. Many philosophers—not just feminists—claim that the problem with Kantian morality is that its focus on rationality denigrates the importance of the emotional aspects of our lives. Because Kant sometimes speaks as if inclinations are nothing more than a hindrance to the possibility of morality,\(^\text{16, 17}\) he is criticized for mischaracterizing our moral lives by making

\(^{16}\) “To be subject to emotion and passions is probably always an illness of mind because both emotion and passion, exclude the sovereignty of reason” ($A$ 155).

\(^{17}\) “Passion, on the other hand, no man wishes for himself. Who wants to have himself put in chains when he can be free?” ($A$ 157)
morality a cold, unfeeling, and impersonal matter of acting from duty at the expense of our feelings and our personal commitments.\textsuperscript{18}

Barbara Herman has given what I take to be a convincing defence of the Kantian moral framework against these sorts of objections.\textsuperscript{19} Herman admits that the emotions cannot serve as the ground of morality for Kant. But this is a good thing, she argues, because emotions are, in themselves, morally indifferent. It’s ultimately a contingent matter whether someone happens to possess kind or sympathetic emotions toward others. If morality were to be grounded in a contingent matter like this, then were these sympathetic emotions absent a person would have neither motivation nor reason to do what we take to be what morality requires.\textsuperscript{20} Kant’s insistence that morality must not be grounded in

\textsuperscript{18} This point has been made by such diverse thinkers as, for example, Carol Gilligan, \textit{In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Susan Wolfe, “Moral Saints,” \textit{Journal of Philosophy} 79 (1982): 419-439.


\textsuperscript{20} “To be beneficent where one can is a duty, and besides there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I assert that in such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth but is on the same footing with other inclinations, for example, the inclination to honor, which, if it fortunately lights upon what is in fact in the common interest and in conformity with duty and hence honorable, deserves praise and encouragement but not esteem; for the maxim lacks moral content, namely that of doing such actions not from inclination but from duty. Suppose, then, that the mind of this philanthropist were overclouded by his own grief, which extinguished all sympathy with the fate of others, and that while he still had the means to benefit others in distress their own troubles did not move him because he had enough to do with his own; and suppose that now, when no longer incited to it by any inclination, he nevertheless tears himself out of this deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination, simply from duty; then the action first has its genuine moral worth. Still further: if nature had put little sympathy in the heart of this or that man; if (in other respects an honest man) he is by temperament cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, perhaps because he himself is provided with the special gift of patience and endurance toward his own sufferings and presupposes the same in every other man or requires it; if nature had not properly fashioned such a man (who would in truth not be its worst product) for a philanthropist, would he not still find within himself a source from which to give himself a far higher worth than what a mere good-natured temperament might have? By all means! It is just then that the worth of character comes out, which is moral and
anything contingent thus leads him to disqualify the emotions from being able to ground morality and to insist that reason must play this role. Herman endorses Kant’s insistence here.

In further defence of Kant, Herman points out that nothing in his view implies that acting in the absence of emotions, or in opposition to them, is required or even desirable from a moral point of view. When our emotions are in line with duty, after all, we face fewer psychological obstacles to acting from duty—this makes the cultivation of the right emotions something to be encouraged from Kant’s point of view. Kant also counsels us to cultivate sympathetic feelings so that we are well-prepared to recognize when others need our help. On Herman’s interpretation of Kant, duty must always be a “limiting condition” to what we do (it must always place limits on what we may do), but it needn’t always be our “primary motive” (it needn’t provide the motivation to perform the act in question). There is nothing wrong with acting out of an emotional attachment to those we love, for example. Our actions are usually overdetermined anyway; as long as the motive of duty, by itself, would be sufficient to make us do what is right, then if we happen to perform an action also because we possess another emotional motive, there’s nothing amiss. All Kant is saying is

incomparably highest, namely that he is beneficent not from inclination but from duty” (G: 4:398-399).

21 “Sympathetic Feeling is Generally a Duty … Sympathetic joy and sadness (sympathia morali) are sensible feelings of pleasure or displeasure (which are therefore to be called ‘aesthetic’) at another’s state of joy or pain (shared feeling, sympathetic feeling). Nature has already implanted in human beings receptivity to these feelings. But to use this as a means to promoting active and rational benevolence is still a particular, though only a conditional, duty. It is called the duty of humanity (humanitas) because a human being is regarded here not merely as a rational being but also as an animal endowed with reason. … But while it is not in itself a duty to share the sufferings (as well as the joys) of others, it is a duty to sympathize actively in their fate; and to this end it is therefore an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feeling appropriate to them” (DV/ 6:356-357).
that if what we do is going to count as moral, then the motive of duty must be, by itself, capable of making us do what is right.\textsuperscript{22}

Making reason, rather than emotion, the ground of morality does not saddle Kantians with a cold and unfeeling moral theory, Herman insists. And the sense in which this move saddles us with an impersonal moral theory is not something that is to be apologized for. It’s true that when our personal projects and desires conflict with the demands of morality it is morality that must take precedence. But this is just to recognize that we have obligations to other members of our moral community, obligations that trump our personal interests and projects when there is a conflict. The impartial moral standpoint Kant advocates isn’t inhuman; it’s unselfish.\textsuperscript{23} By requiring that morality be grounded in reason rather than emotion, Kant is, in effect, warning us that if we let what we do be determined solely by our personal interests and projects, we risk losing sight of ourselves as members of a moral community with obligations to others, and we risk forgetting that our actions have consequences for the lives of other members of this moral community.\textsuperscript{24}

Commentators such as Herman have convincingly dispelled any worries that might stem from Kant’s privileging of the rational over the emotional, I think. Now, I admit that Kant’s privileging of the rational over the animal leads to some uncomfortable moral


\textsuperscript{23} “Pure practical reason merely \textit{intriges upon} self-love, inasmuch as it only restricts it, as natural and active in us even prior to the moral law, to the condition of agreement with this law, and then it is called \textit{rational self-love}. But it \textit{strikes down} self-conceit altogether, since all claims to esteem for oneself that precede accord with the moral law are null and quite unwarranted because certainty of a disposition in accord with this law is the first condition of any worth of a person …, and any presumption prior to this is false and opposed to the law” (\textit{CPR} 5:73).

conclusions, many of which Nussbaum astutely points out. I won’t attempt to address all of these issues here; suffice it to say that I think there are some bullets that a Kantian must bite, but many of the worst of these apparent problems have a Kantian solution. I’ll restrict my discussion here, then, to deal with those of Nussbaum’s criticisms that bear most directly on the task at hand. My goal here, remember, is to establish that people have an obligation to themselves to resist their own oppression. This obligation, I argue, is an obligation to protect oneself from certain harms. And the harms I have in mind are harms the Kantian picture is really good at showing us the moral significance of. I’m open to the possibility that there are some aspects of our moral lives that the Kantian framework can’t properly accommodate; but this framework is indispensable for showing us the moral importance of our rational nature, I contend.

I don’t mean to suggest here that all is well between Kant and feminism. I’m not saying that Kant, like so many other liberal philosophers, isn’t sometimes guilty of taking for granted much of the work that goes into turning asymmetrically dependent needy individuals into free, equal, and independent adults. Nor am I denying that this oversight means there’s a danger of condoning the exploitation of the women who are largely responsible for this work. But I am insisting that such exploitation isn’t a necessary consequence of adopting the Kantian view. And I’m cautioning that if we reject the Kantian framework because of the sorts of considerations Nussbaum emphasizes we risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Kantianism has the resources within it, I claim, to both show us moral harms

25 I argue in Chapter 4, for example, that one of these apparent problems with the Kantian prioritizing of the rational—that a Kantian must admit that people who fail to act rationally can destroy the feature in virtue of which they have moral value, and this means they can be treated as if they had no such value—admits of a Kantian solution.
that can result from oppression, and to suggest ways to ameliorate these harms, that we might otherwise not see.

Furthermore, I think Nussbaum is simply mistaken in her claim that a Kantian must characterize rational capacities as being, in every way, utterly unlike our other animal capacities. Kant himself actually recognizes much of what Nussbaum accuses him of ignoring or denying. Kant appreciates, for example, that our rational capacities don’t spring into existence fully developed. While our capacity to act rationally is innate, this capacity develops gradually as we learn and as we mature. It is something that we acquire.26 This capacity requires a great deal of training and experience to develop properly.27 Kant recognizes that we need to be taught how to achieve the ends we have set for ourselves, that the rational capacities necessary for this free choice are capacities that need to be developed. One of the implications of this is that he thinks that before our rational capacity has developed fully we cannot be held completely responsible for what we do.28 Places where Kant discusses pedagogy are scattered throughout much of his practical philosophy; what he says about the importance of education in these works clearly indicates that he’s aware that

26 “The very concept of virtue already implies that virtue must be acquired…for a human being’s moral capacity would not be virtue were it not produced by the strength of his resolution in conflict with powerful opposing inclinations. Virtue is the product of pure practical reason as it gains ascendancy over such inclinations with consciousness of its supremacy (based on freedom)” (DV 6:477).

27 “[M]an is an animal, who requires discipline, without which he grows up to be not unlike a wild animal, and this is where Rousseau makes a mistake, when he believes that discipline flows from the nature of man” (A 25:447).

28 “Degrees of imputation depend on the degree of freedom. The subjective conditions of freedom are the ability to act, and further, that we know what pertains thereto, that we are aware of the motivating ground and the object of the action. In the absence of these subjective grounds there is no imputation. Thus when children destroy something useful, it cannot be imputed to them, because they know not what they do” (LE 27:291).
our rational capacities are similar to our other animal capacities in at least the respect that they require a great deal of cultivation.\(^{29}\)

Kant also appreciates that our rational capacities are similar to our more ordinary animal capacities in the sense that they are subject to damage and degradation. It’s a presupposition of certain of his most central moral prohibitions that rational capacities can be damaged or degraded: the claim that one ought not damage oneself or others in certain ways presupposes that it’s possible for one to do so. So, for example, Kant recognizes that rational capacities can be destroyed—this follows from his claim that suicide and murder are immoral.\(^{30, 31}\) He also recognizes that rational capacities can be temporarily incapacitated—this follows from his claim that drunkenness and gluttony are immoral.\(^{32}\) It’s true that his

\(^{29}\) I’m indebted to Kate Moran for a helpful discussion on Kant’s views on education.

\(^{30}\) “A human being, however, is not a thing and hence not something that can be used merely as a means, but must in all his actions always be regarded as an end in itself. I cannot, therefore, dispose of a human being in my own person by maiming, damaging, or killing him” (\(G\) 4:429).

\(^{31}\) “The first, though not the principal, duty of a human being to himself as an animal being is to preserve himself in his animal nature.

The contrary of this is willful physical death or killing oneself (\textit{autochiria}), which can be thought of as either total, suicide (\textit{suicidium}), or only partial, mutilating oneself. Mutilating oneself can in turn be either \textit{material}, depriving oneself of certain integral, organic \textit{parts}, that is, maiming oneself, or \textit{formal}, depriving oneself (permanently or temporarily) of one’s \textit{capacity} for the natural (and so indirectly for the moral) \textit{use} of one’s powers” (\(DV\) 6:421).

\(^{32}\) “Brutish excess in the use of food or drink is misuse of the means of nourishment that restricts or exhausts our capacity to use them intelligently. \textit{Drunkenness} and \textit{gluttony} are the vices that come under this heading. A human being who is drunk is like a mere animal, not to be treated as a human being. When stuffed with food he is in a condition in which he is incapacitated, for a time, for actions that would require him to use his powers with skill and deliberation. —It is obvious that putting oneself in such a state violates a duty to oneself. The first of these debasements, below even the nature of an animal, is usually brought about by fermented drinks, but it can also result from other narcotics, such as opium and other vegetable products. They are seductive because, under their influence, people dream for a while that they are happy and free from care, and even imagine that they are strong; but dejection and weakness follow and, worst of all, they create a need to use the narcotics again and even to increase the amount. Gluttony is even lower than that animal enjoyment of the senses, since it only lulls the senses into a passive condition and, unlike drunkenness, does not even arouse imagination to an \textit{active} play of representations; so it approaches even more closely the enjoyment of cattle” (\(DV\) 6:427).
examples tend not to focus on some of the sorts of damage and degradation Nussbaum has in mind—those resulting from “disease, old age, and accident”—but, from a version of the principle of “ought implies can,” we can see that Kant recognizes perfectly well that rational capacities are subject to damage and degradation.

Nussbaum’s contention that Kantianism “makes us think of the core of ourselves as a-temporal,” or that it makes us “forget that the usual human lifecycle brings with it periods of extreme dependency,” then, is far too quick. There is nothing inherent in the Kantian framework, I contend, that prevents us from recognizing that “disease, old age, and accident can impede the moral and rational functions, just as much as other animal functions.” It’s central to my argument, actually, that we are able to recognize that these capacities can be damaged or degraded.

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I argued, in Chapter 3, that people who are oppressed have an obligation to resist their oppression. What I want to consider now is what we are to make of people who refuse to do so. I've argued that such people are guilty of failing to fulfill an important moral obligation; this makes their behaviour immoral. The question now, then, is whether it is possible for someone to degrade herself (either by failing to respect herself or by committing some other immoral deed) to the point where she no longer deserves moral respect. If it is, then there’s a concern that past failures to fulfill the obligation of self-respect could vitiate future instances of this obligation. Someone who fails to respect herself might literally become unworthy of respect.

The question I’ll be taking up in this chapter is whether someone’s immoral behaviour can ever undermine the obligations others have toward her, or whether it can undermine the obligations she has toward herself. This is a broader, more general, version of the question of whether people who behave immorally by acquiescing in their oppression risk losing their right to be respected. This more general problem is raised by the issues of oppression that I’ve been focusing on, but it’s a problem, I contend, for any Kantian.

Before seeing just why this is so, let’s begin with an example of the sort of case I have in mind. “Tralala,” one of the short stories in Hubert Selby’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, is the story of a young woman, Tralala, who lives in Brooklyn in the 1940’s. The story begins
when Tralala is 15, when she discovers that if she has sex with the neighbourhood boys they'll buy her cigarettes and take her to the movies. This progresses to helping the boys rob neighbourhood drunks, then to helping them rob soldiers on leave. Tralala often acts as bait, leading these men off to a dark alley or abandoned lot where the boys can jump them. Some of these robberies are brutal. They hit the men over the head with bricks. Leave them for dead. Eventually, many of the neighbourhood boys are arrested and Tralala tires of sharing her take with the others.

And so Tralala starts out on her own. She picks up johns—usually drunken soldiers on leave—waits until they pass out (or hits them over the head with a bottle to speed up the process), and then steals their money. She’s young and beautiful and has her pick of the men in the bars she frequents. She forms a brief relationship with one of these men, an officer, who represents the possibility of redemption. The officer buys her nice clothing, treats her kindly, and when he ships out he gives her an envelope containing a love letter that asks her to join him after the war. Tralala was expecting money. She becomes enraged. She tears the letter into shreds and returns to the bars.

Months pass, and then years. Things spiral downward. She stops having her pick of the drunks in the nicer bars. She loses her nice clothes. She becomes more and more destitute. She gets kicked out of the nicer bars. And then the not-so-nice ones. She stops bathing, starts drinking constantly, and will sleep with anyone who will give her a place to sleep for the night. And still she goes on, stealing what she can from whoever she can. One night she finds herself back at Willie’s, the bar where she’d started out. The story ends in a single, horrifying, sentence:

Tralala pulled her sweater up and bounced her tits on the palms of her hands and grinned and grinned and grinned and Jack and Fred whooped and roared and the bartender told her to put those goddamn things away and get
thehellouthere and … and Tralala slowly turned around bouncing them hard on her hands exhibiting her pride to the bar and she smiled and bounced the biggest most beautiful pair of tits in the whole world on her hands and someone yelled is that for real and Tralala shoved them in his face and everyone laughed and another glass fell from a table and guys stood and looked and the hands came out from under the skirt and beer was poured on Tralalas tits and someone yelled that she had been christened and the beer ran down her stomach and dripped from her nipples and she slapped his face with her tits and someone yelled youll smotherim ta death—what a way to die—hey, whats for desert—I said taput those goddamn things away ya fuckin hippopotamus and Tralala told him she had the prettiest tits in the world and she fell against the jukebox and the needle scraped along the record sounding like a long belch and someone yelled all tits and no cunt and Tralala told him to comeon and find out and a drunken soldier banged out of a booth and said comeon and glasses fell and Jack knocked over his stool and fell on Fred and they hung over the bar near hysteria … and Tralala still bounced her tits on the palms of her hands turning to everyone as she was dragged out the door by the arm by 2 or 3 and she yelled to Jack to comeon and she/d fuckim blind not like that fucking douchebag he was with and someone yelled we/re coming and she was dragged down the steps tripping over someones feet and scraping her ankles on the stone steps and yelling but the mob not slowing their pace dragged her by an arm and Jack and Fred still hung on the bar roaring … and the 10 or 15 drunks dragged Tralala to a wrecked car in the lot on the corner of 57th street and yanked her clothes off and pushed her inside and a few guys fought to see who would be first and finally a sort of line was formed everyone yelling and laughing and someone yelled to the guys on the end to go get some beer and they left and came back with cans of beer which were passed around the daisychain and the guys from the neighborhood stood around watching and waiting and Tralala yelled and shoved her tits into the faces as they occurred before her and beers were passed around and the empties dropped or thrown and guys left the car and went back on line and had a few beers and waited their turn again and more guys came from Willies and a phone call to the Armybase brought more seamen and doggies and more beer was brought from Willies and Tralala drank beer while being laid and someone asked if anyone was keeping score and someone yelled who can count that far and Tralalas back was streaked with dirt and sweat and her ankles stung from the sweat and dirt in the scrapes from the steps and sweat and beer dripped from the faces onto hers but she kept yelling she had the biggest goddamn pair of tits in the world and someone answered ya bet ya sweet ass yado and more come 40 maybe 50 and they screwed her and went back on line and had a beer and yelled and laughed and someone yelled that the car stunk of cunt so Tralala and the seat were taken out of the car and laid in the lot and she lay there naked on the seat and their shadows hid her pimples and scabs and she drank flipping her tits with the other hand and somebody shoved the beer can against her mouth and they all laughed and yelled and the next one mounted her and her lips were spilt this time and the blood trickled to her chin and
someone mopped her brow with a beer soaked handkerchief and another can of beer was handed to her an she drank and yelled about her tits and another tooth was chipped and the split in her lips was widened and everyone laughed and she laughed and she drank more and more and soon she passed out and they slapped her a few times and she mumbled and turned her head but they couldn’t revive her so they continued to fuck her as she lay unconscious on the seat in the lot and soon they tired of the dead piece and the daisychain broke up and they went back to Willies and the Greeks and the base and the kids who were watching a waiting to take a turn took out there disappointment on Tralala and tore her clothes to small scraps put out a few cigarettes on her nipples pissed on her jerked off on her jammed a broomstick up her snatch then bored they left her lying amongst the broken bottles rust cans and rubble of the lot and Jack and Fred . . . stumbled into a cab still laughing and they leaned toward the window as they passed the lot and got a good look at Tralala lying naked covered with blood urine and semen and a small blot forming on the seat between her legs as blood seeped from her crotch . . . and Fred looking through the rear window and Jack pounding his leg and roaring with laughter . . .

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that there is nothing Tralala could have done to deserve this. Certainly, she’s behaved immorally on many occasions. In one of the story’s most memorable scenes, for example, she laughs at and spits on a sobbing man who she has just robbed and who her friends have just beaten to within an inch of his life. She is callous and heartless; she preys on men who are naïve, weak, and vulnerable. In addition to behaving immorally toward others, you might even think she’s behaved immorally toward herself—that she’s failed to respect herself by allowing her life to spin out of control, by trading sex for movies, cigarettes, and beer money. But nothing she has done—nothing she could do—could justify being gang-raped and left for dead.

The story of Tralala motivates two thoughts, I think. The first is that when someone fails to respect herself she can degrade herself to the point where she has lost something that is of great value. The second is that no matter what someone does—no matter how immoral or degraded she has become—she still deserves to be treated with respect. I think

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most people would intuitively chafe against the suggestion that there is anything someone
could do to make it such that we had no moral obligations toward her. Even the vilest of
people do not forfeit their moral rights. This is because the judgement that someone has
acted immorally does not, we usually think, undermine the basic moral obligations we have
toward her. This much is a moral platitude.

But on the Kantian picture—where most commentators argue that it is someone’s
rational nature that gives her moral value and thus makes her deserve moral respect—it
seems that people who act immorally do not deserve moral respect. Resolving this problem,
then, is what will occupy us in this chapter. Kant is generally interpreted as arguing 1) that
people are autonomous only when they act morally, 2) that people have value in virtue of
their autonomy, and 3) that it is this value that grounds the obligations we have to them.
This interpretation leaves him without a satisfactory resolution to our problem. On this
interpretation, people who fail to act morally lose whatever value it is that makes them
deserve the respect that would constrain others’ behaviour toward them. This, clearly, will
not do. So I intend to offer an alternative interpretation of Kant’s views on these matters.

According to my solution, the feature of people in virtue of which they have intrinsic
value is not the same feature of people in virtue of which they are owed the respect that
constrains our treatment of them. This means, among other things, that a Kantian can
maintain both 1) that someone loses a certain sort of value when she acts in certain immoral
ways, and 2) that when someone has been immoral this doesn’t mean that she has lost
whatever it is that forbids us from treating her however we would like. And because the
reasons in virtue of which people are valuable and that they are owed respect apply in the
same way to oneself as they do to other people, this implication applies to the obligations we
have to ourselves as well as the obligations we have to others. When someone fails to act
morally (toward herself or toward others), this does not vitiate her obligation to respect herself, even though at the same time her failure to do so makes her lose a certain kind of value. This means that, even though someone who fails to resist her own oppression fails to respect herself in the right way, and even though this failure to fulfill the obligation of self-respect makes her lose a certain kind of value, her obligation to resist her oppression does not go away.

I should say that I think the value of the things I have to say in this chapter does not entirely hang on whether I can conclusively defend my interpretation of Kant himself. The philosophical point I mean to establish here is that merely having certain capacities calls for a certain type of treatment and attitudes, while having exercised these capacities in the right way calls, in addition, for certain other treatment and attitudes. I think something very much like this point was intended by Kant, and I attempt to show that his usage of certain key terms maps on to the distinctions I’m making. But, although this chapter is heavily interpretive in nature, I don’t pretend to have provided an exhaustive scholarly work on this matter. Still, even if I’m wrong and Kant didn’t have this point in mind, the account I offer here allows a Kantian to explain the intuition that someone’s immoral behaviour does not undermine our basic moral obligations to her.

RESPECT-WORTHINESS AND DIGNITY

My Kantian proposal is this. People are worthy of the sort of respect that constrains our treatment of them in virtue of something very minimal: their capacity for setting and pursuing ends according to reason. People have unconditional and intrinsic value (i.e., dignity), however, only insofar as they successfully exercise this capacity in a particular way, that is, insofar as they act morally. What’s novel about this proposal is that I am suggesting
that respect-worthiness and dignity should come apart, and that while people are owed the former merely in virtue of the recognition that they possess certain quite minimal rational capacities, they are owed the latter only insofar as they manage to successfully use these capacities in the right way.

Something very much like this idea is behind a distinction that has been articulated by Stephen Darwall. Darwall distinguishes two very different kinds of respect that can be owed to persons: (1) \textit{recognition respect}, which is a matter of properly recognizing the fundamental features of a person in virtue of which she is owed basic moral respect and respecting her accordingly by being willing to constrain one’s behaviour toward her; and (2) \textit{appraisal respect}, which is a matter of evaluating a person’s conduct or character and respecting her insofar as she measures up to certain standards of human excellence.\footnote{Stephen Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” \textit{Ethics} 88 (1977): 36-49.} Appraisal respect is owed to persons only insofar as they earn it through what they do or who they are and so is a sort of respect that one can lose or can have in degrees; by contrast, recognition respect is owed to persons just in virtue of their being persons and so can be neither lost nor had in degrees.

I contend that something very much like this idea—that merely having certain capacities calls for a certain type of treatment and attitudes, while having exercised these capacities calls, in addition, for certain other attitudes and treatment—is actually intended by Kant himself. According to the interpretation I’m about to put forward, the relevant bits of Kantian jargon that map onto these distinctions are \textit{humanity} for the relevant capacities, \textit{personality} for the state of those who have exercised them successfully, \textit{end in itself}-hood for the sort of value that calls for recognition respect, and \textit{dignity} for the sort of value that calls
for appraisal respect. Kant says that our humanity (our rational nature) is an end in itself—
“Rational nature exists as an end in itself” (G 4:429)—and he says that we have dignity insofar as
we act morally—“we represent a certain sublimity and dignity in the person who fulfills all his
duties” (G 4:440). Let’s turn now to look more closely at just what Kant thinks these aspects
of our human nature consist in, and what sort of value he thinks they have.

**Humanity is an End in Itself**

As we saw in the previous chapter, it is in his account of humanity that Kant explains how it
is that people can make legitimate claims on the ways in which they may be treated. That is,
Kant’s account of humanity both explains why people must be respected and explains what
this respect entails. Humanity, for Kant, is not the whole of human nature, but is, rather, a
particular subset of characteristics that are often associated with human nature: specifically,
those having to do with rational nature. As we’ll see below, I favour a relatively minimal
conception of humanity, according to which humanity is nothing more than the bare
capacity to set and pursue ends.

Remember, Kant’s Formula of Humanity commands: “So act that you use humanity,
whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as
a means” (G 4:429). And the ground, or explanatory justification, of this moral principle is
that “Rational nature exists as an end in itself” (G 4:429). In other words, the value of humanity,
according to Kant, consists in the fact that it is an end in itself. And because humanity, or
rational nature, is valuable in this way, there is a categorical law of morality that commands
us to never treat humanity as a mere means.

We saw in Chapter 3 that one of the things Kant means by calling humanity an end
in itself is that it is what he calls an independently-existing end—it isn’t something that we have
an obligation to try to produce when it does not yet exist, but when it exists it is valuable and thus must be respected. This means, we saw, that the obligation to respect rational nature does not require that we maximize the number of individuals with rational nature by creating as many new people as possible. Instead, this obligation requires that we have an attitude of respect toward the individuals with rational nature who already exist. Translating this point into Darwall’s terminology, this means that humanity is something that demands *recognition* *respect*. The recognition that an individual possesses rational nature brings with it an obligation to respect this individual by constraining one’s behaviour toward her in certain ways.

This is further confirmed by another sort of value Kant attributes to humanity. In addition to calling humanity an independently-existing end, Kant also calls humanity an *objective end*:

> [R]ational beings are called *persons* because their nature already marks them out as an end in itself, that is, as something that may not be used merely as a means, and hence so far limits all choice (and is an object of respect). These, therefore, are not merely subjective ends, the existence of which as an effect of our action has a worth *for us*, but rather *objective ends*, that is, beings the existence of which is in itself an end, and indeed one such that no other end, to which they would serve *merely* as means, can be put in its place, since without it nothing of *absolute worth* would be found anywhere; but if all worth were conditional and therefore contingent, then no supreme practical principle for reason could be found anywhere (*G* 4:428).

Objective ends, according to Kant, are “a supreme limiting condition in the use of all means” (*G* 4:438): they place limits both on what other ends we may set and on what means we may use to pursue any of our ends. We are not morally permitted to set ends that conflict with objective ends, nor are we permitted to pursue any end in a way that conflicts an objective end. Objective ends are also held equally by all rational beings, in virtue of their rationality. Subjective ends, on the other hand, are ends that people have only insofar as
they have desires for various contingent things. The constraints that subjective ends place on people are only contingent: they make demands on a rational agent only insofar as she happens to actually want the end in question. But objective ends make demands on a rational agent that are necessary: they apply regardless of whether she actually wants the end. To say that humanity is an objective end is to say that it makes demands on us irrespective of how we feel about it. So one implication of humanity being an end in itself is that it places some kinds of limits on the ways that beings who possess humanity can be treated.

In Darwall’s terms, to say that one’s humanity is an end in itself in the sense of being an objective end is to say that anyone with humanity deserves recognition respect. Calling humanity an objective end, then, is meant to imply that our rational nature is worthy of a kind of respect that places limits on the acceptable ways we can act toward those who have it, whether in ourselves or in others.

PERSONALITY HAS DIGNITY

We’ve just seen that humanity refers to our capacity to act rationally. As we’ll see below, many commentators have argued that Kant means to include in the conception of humanity not just our rational capacities but also the successful exercise of these capacities that culminates in moral behaviour. I want to argue here that this way of interpreting Kant runs together important distinctions that are better kept separate.

To see why this is the case, we must first notice that, despite its potentially misleading label, humanity is just one aspect of human nature. Kant actually thinks human nature includes three distinct elements: animality, humanity, and personality. In the Religion, Kant distinguishes these three “elements of the determination of the human being” in the following way:
1. The predisposition to the animality of the human being, as a living being;
2. To the humanity in him, as a living and at the same time rational being;
3. To his personality, as a rational and at the same time responsible being. (R 6:26)

We have animality simply in virtue of being living motile beings; our animality is what explains our instinctual drives (for self-preservation, reproduction, community with others, etc.). We have personality, on the other hand, insofar as we have the rational capacity to respect the moral law and to act from duty alone; as we’ll see below, personality is what Kant associates with autonomy of the will. Essentially, animality is our capacity to be motivated by instinct; humanity is our capacity to be motivated by reason in general; and personality is what we have when we are motivated by the moral law in particular.

We have a duty, Kant thinks, to raise ourselves up from the more primitive, base, aspects of our nature. We must improve ourselves by cultivating our rational capacities, by seeking the right kinds of education and by attempting to learn from our mistakes:

A human being has a duty to raise himself from the crude state of his nature, from his animality (qua ad actum), more and more toward humanity, by which he alone is capable of setting himself ends; he has a duty to diminish his ignorance by instruction and to correct his errors (DV 6:387).

Hence there is also bound up with the end of humanity in our own person the rational will, and so the duty, to make ourselves worthy of humanity by culture in general, by procuring or promoting the capacity to realize all sorts if

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3 “Our duties to ourselves on the animal level are to preserve ourselves, preserve the species, and preserve our capacity to enjoy life” (DV 6:420).

4 “The capacity to set oneself an end—any end whatsoever—is what characterizes humanity (as distinguished from animality)” (DV 6:392).

5 “It is nothing other than personality, that is, freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature, regarded nevertheless as also a capacity of being subject to special laws — namely pure practical laws given by his own reason, so that a person as belonging to the sensible world is subject to his own personality insofar as he also belongs to the intelligible world; for, it is then not to be wondered at that a human being, as belonging to both worlds, must regard his own nature in reference to his second and highest vocation only with reverence, and its laws with the highest respect” (CPR 5:86-87).
possible ends, so far as this is to be found in a human being himself. In other words, the human being has a duty to cultivate the crude predispositions of his nature, by which the animal is first raised into the human being. It is therefore a duty in itself (DV 6:392).

In Kant’s terms, we have a duty to raise ourselves up out of our *animality* by cultivating our *humanity*.

In addition to the duty we have to attempt to transcend our animality, Kant thinks we have a further duty to raise ourselves up out of our humanity by cultivating our *personality*. While humanity refers to our rational nature, personality, on the other hand, refers our *moral* nature. We have personality insofar as we act morally. Acting morally, for Kant, involves following categorical imperatives—that is, certain unconditional principles of conduct—independently of the fear of punishment or the promise of reward.

Unlike our animal nature and our rational nature, which Kant is consistent in referring to exclusively as our *animality* and our *humanity*, when it comes to our moral nature Kant is far less consistent with his terminology. We just saw that Kant refers to our moral nature as our *personality*. But in other places Kant identifies our moral nature with our *autonomy*:

*Morality* is … the relation of actions to the autonomy of the will, that is, to a possible giving of universal law through its maxims. … Our own will insofar as it would act only under the condition of a possible giving of universal law through its maxims … is the proper object of respect; and the dignity of humanity consists just in this capacity to give universal law, though with the condition of also being itself subject to this very lawgiving (G 4:439-440).

The will is autonomous, for Kant, when the rational being’s capacity to set and pursue his or her own ends results in a form of self-legislation whereby there are certain moral ends that he or she must set for him- or herself.
[W]hat, then, can freedom of the will be other than autonomy, that is, the will’s property of being a law to itself? (G 4:447)

For, this moral law is based on the autonomy of the will, as a free will which, in accordance with its universal laws, must necessarily be able at the same time to agree to that to which it is to subject itself (CPR 5:132).

We are autonomous, Kant thinks, only when we manage to act morally: when our free wills set and pursue ends that are in accordance with the laws of morality (and are in accordance with our inclinations only contingently, if at all).

Autonomy of the will is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition). The principle of autonomy is, therefore: to choose only in such a way that the maxims of your choice are also included as universal law in the same volition (G 4:440).

Interpreting autonomy to encompass our moral nature in this respect means, admittedly, that Kantian autonomy ends up being something very different than what we might ordinarily think of as autonomy. Autonomy is one of those words that has no shortage of different meanings. Gerald Dworkin has said, illustrating the difficulty in nailing down an authoritative definition, that the term “autonomy”

is used sometimes as an equivalent of liberty (positive or negative in Berlin’s terminology), sometimes as an equivalent of self-rule or sovereignty, sometimes as identical with freedom of the will. It is equated with dignity, integrity, individuality, independence, responsibility, and self-knowledge. It is identified with qualities of self-assertion, with critical reflection, with freedom from obligation, with absence of external causation, with knowledge of one’s own interests. … It is related to actions, to beliefs, to reasons for acting, to rules to the will of other persons, to thoughts, and to principles. About the only feature held constant from one author to another are that autonomy is a feature of persons and that it is a desirable quality to have.⁶


In any case, there is, I think, good evidence that Kant means something different in his use of the term ‘autonomy’ than many people usually do. We are autonomous, for Kant, when we *actually act* rationally (and thus morally), not just when we have the capacity to do so.\(^7\)

In other places Kant speaks about our moral nature in terms of our possession of a *good* or *holy will*:

> Morality is thus the relation of actions to the autonomy of the will, that is, to a possible giving of universal law through its maxims. An action that can coexist with the autonomy of the will is permitted; one that does not accord is forbidden. A will whose maxims necessarily harmonize with the laws of autonomy is a holy, absolutely good will (*G* 4:439).

First, this perfection consists subjectively in the *purity* (*puritas moralis*) of one’s disposition to duty, namely, in the law being by itself alone the incentive, even without the admixture of aims derived from the sensibility, and in actions being done not only in conformity with duty but also *from duty*. --

Here the command is ‘be holy’ (*DV* 6:446).

Kant says that a good will, like an autonomous one, is a will that is not subject to the corrupting influence of a person’s desires:

> [When] a rational principle is already thought of as in itself the determining ground of the will without regard to the possible objects of the faculty of desire (hence through the mere lawful form of the maxim), in which case that principle is a practical law a priori and pure reason is taken to be practical of itself. In that case the law determines the will immediately, the action in conformity with it is *in itself good*, and a will whose maxim always conforms with this law is good absolutely, good in every respect and the supreme condition of all good (*CPR* 5:62).

I don’t intend to give a detailed analysis of exactly what the difference between these different concepts that Kant uses to refer to our moral nature amounts to. These terms—*personality, autonomy, and the good will*—will be, for my purposes, interchangeable. What I want to highlight here is that Kant uses each of these terms to support the idea that insofar

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as we act morally we are worthy of the highest form of praise. For clarity’s sake, in what follows I’ll impose some consistency by using the term “personality” to refer to our moral nature. And I’ll be arguing that it is our personality, understood as success in acting morally, that Kant thinks gives us intrinsic value.

Kant attributes to us a very special kind of value—dignity, or absolute worth—insofar as we act morally:

[T]hat which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself has not merely a relative worth, that is, a price, but an inner worth, that is, dignity. Now, morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, since only through this is it possible to be a lawgiving member in the kingdom of ends. Hence morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity (G 4:435).

Things that are ends in themselves have dignity, Kant argues, while all other ends have only price.

The respect that I have for others or that another can require from me … is therefore recognition of a dignity … in other human beings, that is, of a worth that has no price, no equivalent for which the object … could be exchanged (DV 6:462).

What has dignity is of unconditional worth (it’s valuable even if no one happens to value it) and incomparable worth (it’s literally priceless). Because one’s humanity, or rational nature, has dignity, Kant thinks it is valuable even if no one (including oneself) values it, and he thinks it cannot rationally be traded away.

But it’s crucial to notice, for the interpretation I’m putting forward, that Kant does not, strictly speaking, ascribe dignity to humanity, or rational nature in general. Instead, Kant ascribes dignity to rational nature only insofar as it is moral—that is, insofar as it has personality, or autonomy, or a good will.

For, nothing can have a worth other than that which the [universal] law determines for it. But the lawgiving itself, which determines all worth, must
for that very reason have a dignity, that is, and unconditional, incomparable
worth; and the word respect alone provides a becoming expression for the
estimate of it that a rational being must give. Autonomy is therefore the
ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature (G 4:436).

As we’ll see below, this is something that has been recognized, but underanalyzed, by
many other commentators. Kant is, as far as I can tell, relatively consistent in ascribing
dignity to personality rather than to humanity; he’s also relatively consistent in saying that it is
humanity, not personality, that is an end in itself.

The view I am suggesting here thus distinguishes being someone who is an end in
itself from being someone with dignity. The former—end in itself-hood—is what imposes an
obligation to respect someone; the latter—dignity—is what gives someone intrinsic and
unconditional value. I argue that someone is an end in herself in virtue of her humanity, and
someone has dignity in virtue of her personality. Humanity is our rational nature—our
capacity to set and pursue ends on the basis of reason and independently of our desires.
Personality, on the other hand, is not the mere capacity to set and pursue ends on the basis of
reason; personality is, rather, the successful exercise of this capacity. We achieve personality,
then, only when we manage to act morally: when our free wills set and pursue ends that are
in accordance with the laws of morality.

EVIDENCE FOR THIS INTERPRETATION

I think it’s worth asking why Kant might want to argue that end-in-itself-hood and dignity
need to be kept conceptually distinct and, further, why he says that it is humanity, not
personality, that is an end in itself. Remember, humanity is our rational nature in general,
while we have personality only when we use this rational nature to act morally. We might
think it strange that Kant says it’s humanity, rather than personality, that is an end in itself.
After all, given that personality is what connects us to the moral law, it might seem that it should be more important to Kant and thus more central to his account of morality. Why wouldn’t Kant say that it’s our acting *morally* that is an end in itself rather than simply our capacity to act *rationally*?

One reason for Kant to do this, I think, is that otherwise his account would be subject to an extremely unintuitive conclusion. This is the problem we began the chapter with: if people were to be treated as ends in themselves in virtue of their acting morally, rather than in virtue of their capacity to be rational, then people who acted immorally would be less worthy of being treated as ends in themselves: that is, they’d be worthy of less respect. And while there might be a sense in which people are less worthy of respect insofar as they act immorally, this kind of respect—the sort one can gain or lose depending on what she does—is what Darwall would call *appraisal respect*. This is not the sort of respect that is supposed to attach to humanity, as Kant sees it. (This much is clear inasmuch as he calls humanity an *objective end*.) Appraisal respect does not constrain our behaviour toward one to whom it is owed; it is merely an evaluation of one’s conduct or character. Darwall’s *recognition respect*, on the other hand, makes no reference to a person’s actions and does constrain our behaviour toward those to whom it is owed. As we’ve seen, this is the sort of respect that Kant means to require when he calls humanity an end in itself—particularly insofar as he calls humanity an *objective* end. And this fits well with the intuitive thought that our behaviour toward other people is constrained simply in virtue of the fact that they are persons, regardless of the immorality of their deeds.

Further evidence that my interpretation fits within Kant’s moral framework comes from considering what he says about the possibility of losing one’s dignity and whether he thinks a loss of this dignity translates into a loss of the right to demand respect. Would Kant
be willing to attribute dignity to even the most immoral or irrational of persons, or does he think it's possible to behave in ways that could cause one to lose so much of one's dignity that one is no longer deserving of respect? Putting aside the second of these two questions for a moment, we can first see that, while Kant does sometimes speak as if humanity, as an end in itself, has the unconditional and incomparable worth that comes with having dignity (that is, he acts under the presumption that humanity and personality are coextensive, so one who possesses them has dignity and is worthy of respect), in other places he does speak as if someone can lose her dignity if she fails to treat her humanity in certain ways.

Interestingly, most of the places where Kant says that one is in danger of losing one's dignity are not those where one behaves immorally toward others, but rather those where one behaves immorally toward oneself.\(^8\), \(^9\), \(^10\), \(^11\) He says, for example, that

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\(^8\) “Neither can we without destroying our person abandon ourselves to others in order to satisfy their desires, even though it be done to save parents and friends from death; still less can this be done for money. If done in order to satisfy one’s own desires, it is very immodest and unnatural; but if it be done for money, or for some other reason, a person allows himself to be treated as a thing, and so throws away the worth of his manhood. … The most serious offence against the duty one owes to oneself is suicide” (LE 119).

\(^9\) “[T]he principle of self-regarding duties … has no connexion with our well-being or earthly happiness. Far from ranking low in our scale of precedence, our duties towards ourselves are of primary importance and should have pride of place; for … it is obvious that nothing can be expected from a man who dishonours his own person. He who transgresses against himself loses his manliness and becomes incapable of doing his duty towards his fellows. … It follows that the prior condition of our duty to others is our duty to ourselves; we can fulfil the former only in so far as we first fulfil the latter” (LE 117-118).

\(^10\) “The basis of such obligation is not to be found in the advantages we reap from doing our duty towards ourselves, but in the worth of manhood. This principle does not allow us an unlimited freedom in respect of our own persons. It insists that we must reverence humanity in our own person, because apart from this man becomes an object of contempt, worthless in the eyes of his fellows and worthless in himself. Such faultiness is absolute. Our duties towards ourselves constitute the supreme condition and the principle of all morality; for moral worth is the worth of the person as such; our capacities have a value only in regard to the circumstances in which we find ourselves” (LE 121).

\(^11\) “Our duties to ourselves are negative; they restrict our freedom in respect of our inclinations, which aim at our own welfare. Just as law restricts our freedom in our relations with other men, so
[a] man who performed his duty to others badly, who lacked generosity, kindness and sympathy, but who nevertheless did his duty to himself by leading a proper life, might yet possess a certain inner worth; but he who has transgressed his duty towards himself, can have no inner worth whatsoever. Thus a man who fails in his duty to himself loses worth absolutely; while a man who fails in his duty to others loses worth only relatively (LE 117-118).

In other places, Kant insists that “a man who fails in his duty to himself loses worth absolutely,” that “a person [who] allows himself to be treated as a thing … throws away the worth of his manhood,” that “we must reverence humanity in our own person, because apart from this man becomes an object of contempt, worthless in the eyes of his fellows and worthless in himself,” and that one’s “actions must be in keeping with humanity itself if he is to appear in his own eyes worthy of inner respect” (LE 118, 119, 121, 125). These passages suggest that Kant does think that one can put herself in danger of losing her dignity by acting in certain ways toward herself: one risks losing her dignity by failing to respect her own humanity.

Even in those places where Kant says that one loses one’s dignity by acting in certain ways towards others, the loss of dignity ultimately comes from to failures to fulfill obligations to the self. For example, in the Doctrine of Virtue Kant argues that lying is a “renunciation by the speaker of his personality … [that makes] such a speaker … a mere deceptive appearance of a human being, not a human being himself.” A liar, Kant thinks, “has even less worth than if he were a mere thing,” and “throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a human being.” What is wrong with lying, however, is that it is a misuse of one’s natural powers of communication—it is a violation of an obligation one has do our duties to ourselves restrict our freedom in dealing with ourselves. All such duties are grounded in a certain love of honour consisting in self-esteem; man must not appear unworthy in his own eyes; his actions must be in keeping with humanity itself if he is to appear in his own eyes worthy of inner respect” (LE 125).
to oneself, not one that one has to others. Furthermore, Kant argues that lying to oneself is even worse than lying to others, because one who is guilty of this “makes himself contemptible in his own eyes and violates the dignity of humanity in his own person.”\textsuperscript{12} It’s worth emphasizing here, I think, the suggestion that Kant thinks that the neglect of obligations that most threatens one’s dignity is the neglect of obligations one has to oneself rather than the neglect of obligations one has to others. This suggests that obligations to the self, particularly those involving a certain kind of self-respect, enjoy a special pride of place in the Kantian moral framework.

Let’s return now to the second of the two questions raised above. The answer to the first question, it seems clear, is that Kant does think that one can lose dignity, at least by failing to respect one’s own humanity. The next question to ask is whether Kant thinks that a loss of dignity can bring with it a loss of respect-worthiness. It seems that, whatever dignity might be lost by behaving immorally toward others, he does not think that one is owed any less respect. Kant is insistent that even the most immoral and vicious of people can still make demands on how he is permitted to be treated. He says in the \textit{Doctrine of Virtue}, for example, that

\begin{quote}
It\textquotesingle s contemptuous of others (\textit{contenere}), that is, to deny them the respect owed to human beings in general, is in every case contrary to duty; for they are human beings. At times one cannot, it is true, help but inwardly looking down on some in comparison with others (\textit{despicatui habere}); but the outward manifestation of this is, nevertheless, an offense. … I cannot deny all respect to even a vicious man as a human being; I cannot withdraw at least the respect that belongs to him in his quality as a human being, even though by his deeds he makes himself unworthy of it. So there can be disgraceful punishments that dishonour humanity itself (such as quartering a man, having him torn by dogs, cutting off his nose and ears). Not only are such punishments more painful than loss of possessions and life to one who loves honor (who claims the respect of others, as everyone must); they also make a spectator blush with shame at belonging to the species that can be treated that way. …
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{DV} 6:429-430. Passage quoted in full below.
censure of vice … must never break out into complete contempt and denial of any moral worth to a vicious human being; for on this supposition he could never be improved, and this [is] not consistent with the idea of a human being, who as such (as a moral being) can never lose entirely his predisposition to the good. (DV 6:463-464)

And in the Lectures on Ethics, Kant says that

[s]ince men are objects of love, of good-pleasure, in the sense that we ought to love humanity in them, judges ought not when punishing criminals to dishonour their humanity; a miscreant should be punished, but his humanity ought not to be violated by base punishments; for if another dishonours any man’s humanity, it as though he has done so himself, as if he were no longer worthy to be a man, so that he must be treated as an object of universal contempt (LE 197).

Whatever loss of dignity might come from behaving immorally toward others, it seems Kant does not think that this loss of dignity ever means one is worth less respect—at least not the sort of respect that constrains the ways in which one can be treated.

But what about a loss of dignity that results from immoral behaviour directed toward the self? We’ve just seen that Kant seems to regard this kind of immorality as far more grave than immorality directed toward others, at least insofar as it threatens the perpetrator with a loss of dignity. Might he believe, then, that self-directed immorality, unlike other-directed immorality, could make one lose so much dignity that it could translate into a loss of respect-worthiness? Can someone who fails to respect herself eventually lose the right to demand respect from others (or from herself)? It seems not, in this case as well. While Kant clearly thinks that one can lose some of the dignity that comes from having autonomy by failing to fulfill one’s obligations to oneself—this much is clear from the passages we just considered above—he also insists that one cannot lose all of it. In his proscription against suicide in the Doctrine of Virtue, for example, he justifies the impermissibility of killing oneself by insisting that

[a] human being cannot renounce his personality as long as he is a subject of duty, hence as long as he lives; and it is a contradiction that he should be
authorized to withdraw from all obligation, that is, freely to act as if no authorization were needed for this action (DV 6:422-423).

Even someone who fails to fulfill the obligations she has to herself does not become unworthy of respect. As long as someone is alive she subject to the moral law, and this is what makes her worthy of the sort of respect that constrains how she may be treated. I think it’s clear, then, that Kant felt the pull of the intuition that just because someone has been immoral this doesn’t mean that we are thereby permitted to treat her however we would like. Since humanity (rather than personality) is an end in itself, we are obligated to respect people—that is, to have recognition respect for them and thus to constrain our behaviour toward them—regardless of how they happen to act. Kant’s retributivist views on punishment bear this point out as well. Kant believes respecting someone who has committed an immoral deed is compatible with extremely harsh punishment. But, because a wrongdoer is always still worthy of respect, his punishers are constrained in how they may punish him.

This explanation solves one problem, but it might create another. Making humanity rather than personality an end in itself ensures that immoral people are still owed the sort of respect that constrains our behaviour toward them, but making personality rather than humanity be what gives people dignity means that immoral people are in danger of losing their unconditional and incomparable worth. Remember, for Kant, people do not have personality when they behave badly. Since people have dignity in virtue of their personality, failing to act morally thereby makes people lose their dignity. This seems counterintuitive, to say the least. This sort of value intuitively seems like the sort of thing that people have regardless of what they do. It seems strange to say that unconditional and incomparable worth can be revoked for bad behaviour. This interpretive strategy might seem especially
egregious when it comes to unconditional worth—after all, what is making the attribution of
dignity contingent on one's acting the right way, if not imposing a condition upon this
worth?

But notice that what is unconditional here is the value of personality, not the
\textit{attribution} of personality to particular individuals with humanity. In other words, what has unconditiona
w
value is personality itself, not the individuals who contingently possess it. So we

can say that personality, qua something with the unconditional worth of dignity, has
d value even if no one happens to value it and at the same time say that the attribution of personality to individual people is a matter of degree and depends upon the extent to which an individual succeeds in conforming her behaviour to the universalizable maxims of morality.

The claim that ascribing dignity to personality rather than to humanity means that one who fails to act morally risks losing some of her dignity is admittedly counterintuitive. But it looks to be the bullet we must bite in order to solve this interpretive dilemma. It seems strange, to be sure, to suggest that the dignity that people have—their unconditional and incomparable worth—is something that could come and go according to whether they act according to their inclinations instead of according to universalizable maxims. But, remember, the respect owed to people is not contingent upon their actions, because people are ends in themselves in virtue of their humanity rather than their personality. Because of this, we can retain the intuitive thought that our behaviour is constrained toward others regardless of how they act.

Another potential problem for the interpretation I'm offering here is that on this view there's a concern that we are left without a grounding for the respect-worthiness of humanity. I'm arguing, remember, that rational nature is respect-worthy regardless of
whether it has dignity—that is, regardless of whether someone uses her rational nature to act morally. But then what is the justification for this respect-worthiness? If rational nature is not, in itself, intrinsically valuable, then why must it always be treated with respect? Because the standard interpretation of Kant’s views on this matter has it that the respect our humanity is owed derives straightforwardly from the dignity humanity has, it is not subject to this problem. But because I propose to separate the features in virtue of which someone is owed respect from the features in virtue of which she has dignity, and because I argue that someone can be worthy of respect even if she behaves in ways that make her lose her dignity, a critic might argue that I am left without a way to explain or justify why someone’s rational nature must be respected regardless of what she does with it.

There is, however, a straightforward solution to this particular problem. Rational nature, after all, is a necessary precondition for the possibility of someone acting morally. Rational nature is the one thing you need to have if you’re even going to be in the running for having that value which is most morally important (dignity). So humanity is always worthy of (treatment-constraining) respect because it is what makes morality possible.

Now, morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, since only through this is it possible to be a lawgiving member in the kingdom of ends. Hence morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity (G 4:435).

This is, I contend, the best way to interpret the connection between respect-worthiness and dignity: our rational capacities must be respected because they are what make it possible for us to act morally, and insofar as we succeed in acting morally we have the highest possible value.
SOME TEXTUAL COUNTEREVIDENCE

My suggestion here is that Kant means to separate the dignity people have from the respect they are owed and that he does not think that a loss of the former can affect the latter.

There are good reasons for adopting this interpretation, I’ve argued. But as we’ll see below, this claim is at odds with all of the Kant scholarship on this issue that I am aware of. Kant is generally interpreted as deriving the respect that we owe to people from the dignity they have. Furthermore, this interpretation faces what appears to be considerable textual counterevidence. For example, in one place Kant explicitly says that “morality is an end in itself” (*DV* 6:422-423), in other places he refers to “the dignity of humanity within us” (*G* 4:436) and to “humanity in its proper dignity” (*CPR* 5:88). I’ll admit that my interpretation is controversial, and it certainly doesn’t fit with everything in Kant’s texts. It’s admittedly not all that difficult to come up with examples of passages where Kant says things that cut against my interpretation, where he says things other than that it is personality that has dignity and humanity that is an end in itself. It’s also relatively easy to come up with examples of passages where Kant says things that alternately support and cut against my interpretation. I want to examine four such cases now.

The first example of a passage that alternates between supporting and undermining my interpretation comes from the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Here, Kant runs together the four distinctions I’ve been at pains to keep apart:

The moral law is *holy* (*inviolable*). A human being is indeed unholy enough but the *humanity* in his person must be holy to him. In the whole of creation everything one wants and over which one has any power can also be used *merely as a means*; a human being alone, and with him every rational creature, is an *end in itself*: by virtue of the autonomy of his freedom is he the subject of the moral law, which is holy (*CPR* 5:87).
First he says here that it’s in virtue of someone’s humanity that she, and every other rational creature, is an end in herself. This is precisely the line I’ve been pushing. But then Kant says that

\[\text{[J]ust because of this every will, even every person’s own will directed to himself, is restricted to the condition of agreement with the autonomy of the rational being, that is to say, such a being is not to be subjected to any purpose that is not possible in accordance with a law that could arise from the will of the affected subject himself; hence this subject is to be used never merely as a means but as at the same time an end (CPR 5:87).}\]

Here he’s said that it’s the autonomy of rational beings (which, remember, I’m interpreting as the successful exercise of one’s rational capacities, i.e., as actually acting morally) that means they must “be used never merely as a means but as at the same time an end.” I’ve been arguing that the successful exercise of someone’s rational capacities is what gives her dignity, not what means she must always be treated as an end in herself. And he goes on to say that

\[\text{[W]e rightly attribute this condition even to the divine will with respect to the rational beings in the world as its creatures, inasmuch as it rests on their personality, by which alone they are ends in themselves (CPR 5:87).}\]

He’s said here that rational creatures are ends in themselves in virtue of their personality: again, exactly what I’m arguing is not the case.

A second example of a passage that alternately supports and undermines my interpretation comes from the Doctrine of Virtue:

The respect that I have for others or that another can require from me (observantia aliis praestanda) is therefore recognition of a dignity (dignitas) in other human beings (DV 6:462).

Immediately, this subverts my interpretation. Kant has said that respect is required by the recognition that someone has dignity, whereas I’ve been arguing that respect is required by the recognition that someone is an end in itself. Then Kant tells us that
[h]umanity itself is a dignity; for a human being cannot be used merely as a means by any human being (either by others or even by himself) but must always be used at the same time as an end (DV 6:462).

Again: not good. Humanity’s not supposed to have dignity; personality is. What’s worse, Kant implies that this dignity is what makes someone an end in herself. But then Kant turns around and says that

[i]t is just in this that his dignity (personality) consists, by which he raises himself above all other beings in the world that are not human beings and yet can be used, and so over all things (DV 6:462).

This sits much more nicely with the interpretation I’m putting forward. Here, he once again associates dignity explicitly with personality. Unfortunately, he immediately goes on to associate dignity with humanity:

But just as he cannot give himself away for any price (this would conflict with his duty of self-esteem), so neither can he act contrary to the equally necessary self-esteem of others, as human beings, that is, he is under obligation to acknowledge, in a practical way, the dignity of humanity in every other human being (DV 6:462).

There’s no way to explain this particular instance away. Were my interpretation to be completely uncontroversial, Kant would have had to say here that it’s the dignity of the personality in others that we must acknowledge. Kant goes on to say that it follows from this “dignity of humanity” that

[h]ence there rests on him a duty regarding the respect that must be shown to every other human being (DV 6:462).

Notice that it’s ambiguous here, whether we owe other people respect because they have humanity (which fits with my interpretation) or because they have dignity (which does not).

A third example of a passage that similarly alternates between supporting and undermining my interpretation is found in what Kant says about the vice of lying in the

Doctrine of Virtue. He starts off by saying that
The greatest violation of a human being’s duty to himself regarded merely as a moral being (the humanity in his own person) is the contrary of truthfulness, lying (DV 6:429).

If Kant were consistent in using the terminological distinctions I’m advocating, a duty to oneself “regarded merely as a moral being” would be to the personality in one’s own person, not to the humanity in one’s own person, as he says here. He goes on to say that when someone lies to himself,

he makes himself contemptible in his own eyes and violates the dignity of humanity in his own person (DV 6:429).

Now he’s gone and said that the humanity in one’s own person has dignity. But I’ve been suggesting that dignity attaches to personality, not to humanity. Humanity is supposed to be what makes someone an end in itself, not what gives her dignity. None of this bodes well for my suggested interpretation. Kant then tells us that lying doesn’t merely violate one’s dignity, it actually destroys it:

By a lie a human being throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a human being (DV 6:429).

At least here he hasn’t said what the dignity in a human being attaches to. This particular line is consistent with dignity attaching to either the humanity or the personality in a person. (Though given that this line follows straightaway after the line where he’s said that dignity attaches to humanity, we probably shouldn’t put too much stock in this ambiguity. There’s no real reason to think he’s changed his mind so quickly about what dignity attaches to.)

Kant goes on to explain exactly what’s wrong with lying:

A human being who does not himself believe what he tells another … has even less worth than if he were a mere thing; for a thing, because it is something real and given, has the properly of being serviceable so that another can put it to some use. But communication of one’s thoughts to someone through words that yet (intentionally) contain the contrary of what the speaker thinks on the subject is an end that is directly opposed to the natural purposiveness of the speaker’s capacity to communicate his thoughts,
and is thus a renunciation by the speaker of his **personality**, and such a speaker is a mere deceptive appearance of a human being, not a human being himself (*DV* 6:429). (Emphasis mine.)

Here, finally, we have some support for my interpretation. Lying is, in effect, a perversion of someone’s capacity to communicate. This amounts to a renunciation of one’s personality, Kant thinks. Personality is what we have when we actually successfully behave morally, remember. Lying is a renunciation of this because it’s a failure to do what the moral law requires of us. The ultimate problem with lying, then, boils down to a matter of its effect on one’s **personality**, not one’s humanity. This explains why it results in a loss of dignity (which, I’m suggesting, attaches to personality instead of humanity).

And, finally, a fourth example, also from the *Doctrine of Virtue*, that also both supports and undermines my interpretation:

[A] human being regarded as a *person*, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price; for as a person (*homo noumenon*) he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in itself, that is, he possesses a **dignity** (an absolute inner worth) (*DV* 6:434).

So far it looks as if my interpretation is correct: Kant is clearly saying that dignity attaches to personality, that it is properly ascribed to people insofar as they are autonomous, or behave morally. But then he goes on immediately to say that this dignity is that by which [this person] … exacts **respect** for himself from all other rational beings in the world (*DV* 6:434).

This fits much less well with my interpretation. Respect-worthiness, I am arguing, is supposed to attach to humanity, not personality or autonomy. We are able to make claims on the way others are permitted to treat us in virtue of our **humanity**, I am arguing. It seems that Kant has just denied this and has said instead that it is the dignity we have in virtue of
our personality or autonomy that gives us the right to be respected by others. But then he goes on to say just the reverse:

Humanity in his person is the object of the respect which he can demand from every other human being, but which he must also not forfeit. (DV 6:435)

Thus Kant ends up saying just what we would expect him to say if my interpretation is the correct one. Once again, it’s humanity that grounds the respect that is owed from others, not autonomy.

I am not aware of a single passage that settles this issue definitely. And, given that Kant is widely recognized as treating ‘humanity’ and ‘personality’ as if they were interchangeable, we might think it’s probably best to not put too much stock into any given instance of how he uses the different terms. As these passages show, in some places Kant uses these terms interchangeably. But, in other places, he explicitly defines the terms differently. I do not now know how to make these differing strains in Kant completely consistent. However, even if these textual kinks cannot be ironed out completely, I want to foreground Kant’s characterization of humanity as an objective end—an end that places limits on how beings with humanity can be treated—and foreground Kant’s attribution of dignity to personality instead of humanity. Doing this suggests that we have reason for thinking that, at least according to what on my interpretation is Kant’s most considered view, ‘humanity’ and ‘personality’ are not interchangeable, and that the former is what is owed respect while the latter is what has dignity.

COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS

I’ve been arguing that the Kantian moral framework needs certain distinctions: we need to be able to capture the idea that merely having certain capacities calls for a certain type of
treatment and attitudes, while having exercised these capacities calls, in addition, for certain other attitudes and treatment. Another commentator, Thomas Hill, has recognized the need for similar distinctions in Kant. “We need a distinction,” Hill says, “between two kinds of respect: respecting persons for their merits and respecting persons for their social positions.”13 One reason we need this distinction, Hill thinks, is that without it we cannot answer the question of whether people who act immorally nevertheless deserve respect. Like me, Hill thinks Darwall’s distinction between recognition respect and appraisal respect is relevant to this question. But Hill claims that this distinction, by itself, ultimately merely pushes the ball a bit further down the field:

playing with these conceptual implications will not get us very far toward a deep justification. Even if it is, for some speakers, a tautology that human beings should be treated with respect, we may still wonder why we should evaluate the most vicious members of our biological species to the normative status of ‘human being’ … Building entitlements into the definition of the [term] ‘human being’ … makes it all too easy to defend the [proposition] ‘Human beings should be respected’ … , for it simply turns them into tautologies. Once we do this, however, the moral controversy merely shifts to another question, namely, what entitles anyone to the [label] ‘human being’? … “[A]lthough the demand to respect people as human beings treats ‘being human’ (or ‘having humanity’) as a moral status, it leaves open to question what rights and responsibilities should belong to that position. ‘Respect her as a human being’ does not mean ‘Esteem her as a comparatively superior human being’ but rather ‘Accord her all the respect (presumptively) due to anyone who has the status of being human.’ But specifically what respect is (presumptively) due to all human beings, and whether it can be forfeited, so far remains an open issue.”14

The real question, Hill thinks, is why we should respect human beings in the first place.

Only after we’ve answered this question can we move on to answer the question of whether the right to this respect can be forfeited.


14 Hill, “Must Respect be Earned?” 90-91.
Hill goes on to answer both these questions by defending an interpretation of Kant according to which we are committed to respecting all human beings because this respect is an “essential aspect of the moral framework for deliberation to which we are in fact committed by our concept of ourselves as moral agents, subject to duties.”\textsuperscript{15} This Kantian moral framework, as Hill understands it, looks very much like the constructivist moral framework popularized by Rawls.

The basic idea is that, for purposes of thinking about what particular moral principles we should endorse, how they are to be interpreted, and what exceptions should hold, we can appropriately think of moral principles as principles that all \textit{reasonable} human beings would accept, as justifiable to themselves and others, under certain ideal conditions. The idea of the ‘reasonable’ here, as in John Rawls’s work, is broader than the idea of ‘the rational’, as contemporary decision theorists understand this; for reasonableness includes a willingness to reciprocate with others on mutually agreeable terms.\textsuperscript{16}

One of the mutually agreeable terms that Hill thinks it is rational (and therefore moral) for all of us to endorse is a presumption that anyone who has the capacity for moral reasoning deserves to be treated with a certain kind of respect. And, when it comes to people who we are not sure have this capacity—people who act so immorally that we cannot look to their behaviour as evidence that they have the capacity to reason morally—Hill thinks it’s most reasonable for us to err on the side of “wasting our moral scruples where they are not needed” rather than “wrongfully casting a potentially responsible human being out of the moral community.”\textsuperscript{17} While we can’t be entirely sure that immoral people have not forfeited

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\item \textsuperscript{15} Hill, “Must Respect be Earned?” 95.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Hill, “Must Respect be Earned?” 96.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Hill, “Must Respect be Earned?” 106.
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their right to be respected, for practical purposes, it’s best to assume that they deserve the same respect that everyone else does.

Now, I’m amenable to Hill’s solution here, as far as it goes. But when it comes to the interpretive details of how to make Kant’s jargon compatible with this solution, Hill and I are on very different pages. The clearest evidence that Hill’s interpretive solution to this problem is very different from mine is found elsewhere, in a different article, where he discusses the question of how acting in accordance with duty affects one’s moral worth. Hill argues there that

the moral worth in question [, when evaluating someone’s actions,] is not the same as the ‘intrinsic value’ or ‘dignity’ of persons. Kant ascribes to human personality a worth which is not diminished or increased by what a person does. It depends not on his actions but upon his capacities. This is a man’s ‘inner worth’ as a person, based on the fact that he is a moral agent rather than upon his moral achievements. The moral worth which I have been discussing is, in contrast, the moral worth of a man’s actions. This varies with what a man does, his motives, and the type of duties that apply.\(^\text{18}\)

What’s puzzling is that Hill doesn’t seem to recognize that he hasn’t covered all his bases here. He’s told us that the moral worth of someone’s actions is not the same as her “inner worth,” but he hasn’t told us what the worth of someone’s actions actually is in Kant’s terminology. He has, in effect, identified an important distinction but left us without a way to talk about it in the Kantian system.

Furthermore, despite his astuteness in recognizing the need for these distinctions, I contend that Hill’s execution of these distinctions gets things almost exactly wrong. On Hill’s way of carving things up, \textit{personality} refers to the capacity for moral action and \textit{dignity} refers to the sort of value that calls for recognition respect. But this leaves no Kantian

jargon left to apply to the state of having exercised one’s moral capacities successfully and none to apply to the sort of value that calls for appraisal respect. Hill recognizes that the moral worth people have in virtue of their achievements can’t be the same worth they have simply in virtue of being moral agents, but he fails to explain this distinction in a way that is consistent with a Kantian framework. Hill’s solution to the problem of whether immoral people forfeit their right to be respected comes at the expense of his Kantianism, I contend. His solution is simply not expressible in Kantian terms.

Hill, like many other commentators, doesn’t distinguish between humanity, on the one hand, and autonomy, personality, and the good will, on the other, in the way I’m advocating. This means that none of these commentators distinguish between being an end in itself, and having dignity, in the way I do. Let’s turn to look at some of these other commentators now.

Several commentators offer interpretations of what humanity consists in that are much more robust than my relatively minimal conception of humanity as our rational capacities to set and pursue ends. Richard Dean, for example, argues that humanity and the good will are identical. Dean claims to solve the problem of the apparent inconsistency in Kant’s texts—where Kant says in some places that the only thing good without qualification is the good will (G 4:393), but in other places that “rational nature” or “the human being and in general every rational being” exists “as an end in itself” (G 4:428), and so it looks like he’s being inconsistent between valuing the good will and valuing rational nature as such—by defending an interpretation of Kant according to which humanity just is the good will.

Kant begins the Groundwork with the claim that only a good will is good without qualification, and that only a good will has incomparably high value, or dignity. Later in the Groundwork, he says that only humanity is an end in itself, and only humanity has a dignity. A thorough analysis of these claims reveals that something that has an incomparably high value, and is valuable
without qualification, must also be an end in itself. So good will must be the end in itself.\(^\text{19}\)

In other words, Dean, in effect, argues that humanity is something we have fully only when we are acting morally.

Other commentators argue that it is humanity and autonomy that are equivalent. On Mark Timmons’ view of the relationship between autonomy and humanity, our rational nature (our *humanity*) is an *end in itself*—i.e., has unconditional, intrinsic value (*dignity*) and thus must be respected unconditionally—in virtue of our capacity to act freely on the basis of reason and independently of our desires (our *autonomy*). Timmons articulates this view quite clearly when he says:

> Since (1) our rational natures make us ends in ourselves, and (2) we have this status because we possess autonomy, it follows that (3) our nature as autonomous agents makes us ends in ourselves. (4) Anything with the status of an end in itself has unconditional value, and so (5) our autonomous rational natures have unconditional value. (6) If something has unconditional value, then there is an unconditional requirement to respect it. (7) Thus, there is a basic unconditional requirement to respect the autonomy of agents.\(^\text{20}\)

According to this view, humanity *just is* autonomy: “Kant uses the term ‘humanity’ to refer to the sort of autonomy that is part of our natures as rational creatures.”\(^\text{21}\)

This, it should be clear, is not my view. The view I suggest distinguishes being an end in itself from being someone with dignity. The former—*end-in-itself*-hood—is what imposes an obligation to respect someone; the latter—*dignity*—is what gives someone intrinsic and unconditional value. I argue that someone is an end in herself in virtue of her


\(^\text{21}\) Timmons, 157.
humanity, and someone has dignity in virtue of her autonomy. Humanity, I argue, is our rational nature—our capacity to set and pursue ends on the basis of reason and independently of our desires. Timmons—mistakenly, I contend—calls this autonomy. Autonomy, I argue, is not the mere capacity to set and pursue ends on the basis of reason; autonomy is, rather, the successful exercise of this capacity.

Other commentators have defended views that are much closer to my own. For example, because Paul Guyer focuses on Kant’s characterization of autonomy as “the property of the will by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition).” (G 4:440), he ends up arguing that Kant sees autonomy, or self-governance by universal law, as the condition that is necessary to achieve and maintain freedom in two … senses—namely, the independence of the choices and actions of a person not only from domination by other persons, but also from domination by his own inclinations. 22

Kantian autonomy isn’t simply freedom of the will, Guyer argues. Rather, Kantian autonomy is “the aim that a person with free will must adopt if he is to preserve and promote his freedom of choice and action …, which is something such an agent ought to do, and can do, but does not necessarily do.” 23 That is, according to Guyer’s interpretation, autonomy is not the mere capacity to choose rationally; rather, autonomy is the successful exercise of this capacity, which is possible for us to achieve, but something we can and do fail to achieve all the time. Autonomy is something we strive for, not something we merely have in virtue of our rational powers. This fits very well with my interpretation of Kantian autonomy. And what, then, is humanity, for Guyer? This, too, fits well with my


interpretation. Guyer says that “it is precisely the capacity to set and consent to ends and the capacities necessary for us to pursue those ends in which humanity as Kant conceives it consists.”

Thomas Hill is someone else whose view is in some ways quite close to my own. He says the following of humanity:

Unfortunately the texts are not unequivocal about exactly what characteristics make up our humanity. In the *Groundwork* the ‘rational nature’ of human beings is clearly intended to be included under, if not identified with, their humanity. … In the original German, however, it is not so definite that rationality is the only feature of humanity. … Another passage suggests that various human talents are part of our humanity. … In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, however, Kant seems to distinguish these powers from humanity in persons. He says that the characteristic of humanity, as distinct from animality, is ‘the power to set an end … any end whatsoever’ (DV 51 [392]; MPV 50). … Given Kant’s repeated insistence on formulating the supreme moral principle independently of contingent assumptions, I think it is most reasonable to construe ‘humanity’ as including only those powers necessarily associated with rationality and ‘the power to set ends.’

Hill’s relatively minimal conception of humanity, as merely the power to set ends, fits nicely with my view. When it comes to autonomy, however, Hill’s view differs from mine. It would be a mistake, Hill claims, to interpret Kantian autonomy as something a person has only when she acts morally. Rather, according to Hill’s interpretation of Kantian autonomy,

[i]n saying that men have autonomous (or positively free) wills, Kant attributes to them a … kind of freedom [that is] … ‘the property of being a law to oneself’ (*G* 446-447, 440). A person is a law to himself, I take it, if he adopts principles for himself and regards himself bound by them and if he was not caused or even motivated to adopt them by any contingent circumstances (such as his desires). A person who is autonomous in this sense gives himself principles without accepting them on authority, out of fear, or even from an interest in his own or others’ welfare. He regards himself bound by these principles and is disposed to follow them, but does

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not always do so. All men, Kant held, are autonomous in this sense. And, in fact, the only principles they adopt as autonomous persons are those expressed in the various formulations of the Categorical Imperative.²⁶

We are autonomous not when we actually act morally, Hill thinks, but when we regard ourselves as bound by principles that we have given ourselves. Whether we actually follow these principles determines whether our actions count as moral; but our wills count as autonomous whether we successfully follow these principles or not.²⁷ The reason Hill thinks Kantian autonomy must not hinge on moral behaviour is that, if it did, he thinks we’d be committed to defending the unintuitive claim that “since autonomy is the ground of human dignity, dignity and so the respect owed to human beings must vary with one’s level of moral achievement.”²⁸ We would, in other words, be stuck with the problem that’s motivating us in this chapter. But, as we’ve seen, I contend that we can solve this problem even if we interpret Kantian autonomy as a matter of successfully acting morally.

Christine Korsgaard’s views on how we should understand Kantian autonomy seem to be more in line with mine than Hill’s views are. She says, of autonomy, that “[w]hen you are motivated autonomously, you act on a law that you give to yourself; when you act heteronomously, the law is imposed on you by means of a sanction – you are provided with

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²⁷ It’s not clear to me how to make sense of Hill’s idea that someone could regard herself as bound by a principle that she sometimes chooses not to follow yet still count as autonomous. If someone really has adopted a principle of action, and really does regard herself as bound by it, then it seems to me that on a Kantian conception of motivation she couldn’t not follow it and still count as autonomous. I.e., in not following the principle she has set for herself, she would show herself to be acting heteronomously rather than autonomously. But I won’t explore this criticism of Hill further here; it’s enough for my purposes to show that Hill’s views on what Kantian autonomy consists in are not the same as mine.

²⁸ Hill, “The Kantian Conception of Autonomy,” 95. (Cited above in note 6.)
an interest in acting on it.”²⁹ It appears from this that Korsgaard, like Hill, thinks autonomy requires giving the law to yourself. But is also appears that she, like me, thinks autonomy also requires actually acting on this law. Also like me, Korsgaard characterizes humanity as merely the power to set ends. And she argues that it is this rational capacity by itself, not this capacity only when it is used to set morally required ends, that is what Kant’s Formula of Humanity requires us to treat as an end in itself:

Kant takes the characteristic feature of humanity, or rational nature, to be the capacity for setting an end. … [I]t is the capacity for the rational determination of ends in general, not just the capacity for adopting morally obligatory ends, that the Formula of Humanity orders us to cherish unconditionally.³⁰

And Korsgaard’s characterization of what Kant means by calling humanity an end in itself also fits very well with my interpretation. She, too, focuses on what Kant says about being an end in itself in the sense of being an objective end, or end that imposes constraints on how it may be treated:

What is involved in treating your own and every other human being’s capacity for the rational choice of ends … as an end in itself? … Kant thinks that this end functions in our deliberations negatively—as something that is not to be acted against.³¹

Guyer’s, Korsgaard’s, and Hill’s interpretations all line up nicely with various aspects of my interpretative strategy. Each of these commentators concurs with my characterization of humanity as merely our rational capacities. Guyer explicitly concurs with my characterization of autonomy as the successful exercise of our capacities. Korsgaard seems


to as well, and she explicitly concurs with my characterization of what it means for our rational nature to be an end in itself as something that demands the sort of respect that constrains how we may be treated.

But then each of these commentators goes on to blur the distinction between being an end in itself and having dignity. Guyer, for example, says that “the idea of humanity as an end in itself … is identical to the idea of the incomparable dignity of human autonomy or freedom governed by the law that we give to ourselves.” That is, Guyer argues that there is no difference between the claim that our humanity is an end in itself and the claim that our autonomy gives us dignity. And Hill says that

humanity in each person has dignity, no matter how immoral the person may be … . Autonomy is said to be the ground of dignity, and this is a property of the will of every rational being, namely, the property of legislating to oneself universal (moral) laws without the sensuous motives of fear, hope for reward, and the like (G 4:436, 428, 439). … As far as human beings are concerned, this amounts to saying that humanity in persons has dignity; and, as we have seen, Kant does not think that one loses one’s humanity when one acts immorally.

There seems to be no difference, for Hill, between autonomy and humanity, nor between dignity and end-in-itself-hood. Korsgaard, too, implies that dignity attaches to the capacity for acting morally—what she has elsewhere characterized as humanity, not autonomy—rather than attaching to the successful exercise of this capacity.

Only one thing—the good will itself—is assigned an intrinsic value or inner worth … . If we regard ourselves as having the power to justify our ends, … we must regard ourselves as having an inner worth—and we must treat others who can also place value on their ends in virtue of their humanity as having the same inner worth.

32 Guyer, Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness, 9-10.

33 Hill, “Humanity as an End in Itself”, 47.
If human beings have an intrinsic value by virtue of the capacity for valuing things, then human beings bring goodness into the world.\textsuperscript{34}

This is where I differ from these commentators: I argue that to say that humanity is an end in itself is to say that it must be respected in certain ways, while to say that autonomy has dignity is to say that it has intrinsic and unconditional value. Being an end in itself is not the same thing as having dignity, I contend. These are two very different sorts of value.

Unlike these commentators, I argue that Kant means to separate the dignity one has in virtue of her capacity to be moral from the respect that is owed to her in virtue of her capacity to be rational. Since, according to this interpretation, a certain kind of respect is owed to people regardless of how they behave—namely, a respect that constrains the way a being to whom it is owed can be treated—then, even if someone loses some of her dignity by failing in her obligation to herself to respect her humanity, she is nevertheless still required to respect her humanity. Because the obligation to have respect for humanity applies to the self as well as to others, and because this obligation hinges on one’s capacity for rationality, not on how one actually exercises this capacity, the obligation of self-respect is not vitiated by a failure to fulfill it. One who fails to respect her rational capacities and abilities is still morally required to take the steps necessary to protect, foster, and respect these capacities and abilities, even while at the same time her failure to do so makes her lose a certain kind of worth.

I’ll admit that it’s not completely clear that any of this is what Kant had in mind. As I’ve explained, I think the textual evidence is ultimately inconclusive at best. But, even if I am wrong and none of this is what Kant himself had in mind, it’s a promising way for a

Kantian to achieve the intuitive result that our most basic obligations to others are not affected by how they happen to act. The other commentators we've just looked at don't seem to have a way to address the problem that has motivated this chapter. Whether they'd like it or not, they all seem to be committed to the view that someone can act so immorally that she is no longer worthy of respect.

CONCLUSION

According to standard interpretations of Kant’s practical philosophy, I think it is not entirely clear why Kant insists that the value of one’s personality always remains, despite how she treats herself. One explanation might be that Kant thinks the capacities and abilities of one’s rational nature always remain, even if one neglects one’s obligations to herself and never exercises these capacities or abilities. Another might be that his insistence here is merely a (perhaps overly) optimistic prediction, a stubborn clinging to the hope that surely no one could ever let themselves become so degraded that they lost this set of capacities and abilities completely. But I’ve suggested an alternative interpretation of what is going on here. I’ve suggested that Kant’s insistence that the value of personality can never be truly extinguished is instead meant to reflect a specific theoretical point: it is not so much that Kant thinks it is impossible for a being with the rational capacities and abilities of humanity to lose these capacities and abilities completely, but that he thinks that the recognition that a being has humanity—that it has the capacities and abilities of rational nature—means that we are obligated to constrain our behaviour toward her no matter what she does to undermine or show disrespect toward these capacities or abilities in herself.

Furthermore, according to my interpretation, even if one loses some of her dignity by failing in her obligation to herself to respect her humanity, she is nevertheless still
required to respect her humanity. Because the obligation to have respect for humanity applies to the self as well as to others, and because this obligation hinges on one's capacity or ability for rationality, not on how morally well one actually exercises this capacity or ability, the obligation of self-respect is not vitiated by a failure to fulfill it. Someone who fails to respect her rational capacities or abilities is still morally required to take the steps necessary to respect these capacities and abilities, even though at the same time her failure to do so makes her lose a certain kind of worth.

On this interpretation, Kant ascribes dignity to personality rather than humanity, and he ascribes respect-worthiness to humanity rather than personality. I recognize that I am implying here that one who fails to act morally risks losing some of her dignity. But I am also suggesting here that, even if one loses some of her worth, we are still constrained in how we are permitted to treat her. It is admittedly less than completely desirable to have to admit that the dignity (the unconditional and incomparable worth) one has in virtue of one’s personality can be lost through bad behaviour (and thus that it can come in degrees). But I think this is a far more attractive bullet to bite once we realize that, because the constraints upon the way one can be treated are a matter of humanity, not personality, the respect one is owed in virtue of one’s humanity cannot be done away with, regardless of how one acts.

I’ve put forth here what I think is a novel interpretation of Kant’s views on the value of humanity and personality and of his views on the relation between them. As we’ve seen, Kant himself is not always as consistent on this point as we might like him to be. However, I’ve also argued that considerations drawn from Kant’s ethics as a whole tell in favour of this being his considered view. What’s more, I think it is the case that one loses a very important kind of value by treating herself (or letting herself be treated) in certain ways, and so I think there is a sense in which this sort of person has less dignity. But, at the same time, whatever
this loss of value is, it does not, ever, translate into a loss of a person’s right to be treated in certain ways, simply in virtue of the fact that she is a certain sort of being. In other words, I am arguing that one can become less valuable insofar as she abuses, defiles, dishonours, or fails to develop aspects of her moral agency, but that this loss of value never threatens her moral patience.

We came to this problem, remember, because an implication of the Kantian account I’ve been defending in this dissertation seemed to be that if oppression harms rational nature, and if the value of rational nature is what grounds the obligation to resist oppression, then a person whose rational nature has been harmed by oppression will at some point no longer be obligated to resist it. The worry was that failing to fulfill the obligation to protect one’s rational nature from the harms of oppression might actually vitiate future instances of this obligation.

I’ve responded to this objection by defending a novel interpretation of Kant’s views on the relation between the value we have and the respect we are owed. I argue, contra the received view among Kant scholars, that the feature in virtue of which someone has intrinsic value is not the same feature in virtue of which she is owed the respect that constrains how she may be treated (by herself or others). So, even though someone who fails to resist her own oppression fails to respect herself in the right way, and even though this moral failing does make her lose a certain kind of value, her obligations to respect herself and to resist her oppression do not go away.
I’ve argued above that people have an obligation to resist their own oppression. But what exactly does this obligation require? What is someone obligated to do when she is obligated to resist her own oppression, and when is she so obligated? Just how demanding is this obligation? Perhaps someone is obligated to resist her own oppression whenever she is oppressed. And perhaps, when she is so obligated, she is obligated to do whatever it takes to neutralize or dismantle the systems that oppress her. But, if this is the case, then given the ubiquity of oppression and the resilience of the systems that produce it, the obligation to resist one’s own oppression would be very demanding. Probably too demanding, in fact.

There’s a real concern, I concede, that my account might be guilty of demanding too much of people. We just can’t be obligated to neutralize or dismantle the systems that produce oppression every time we are oppressed, the thought might be. Nor can we be obligated to do whatever it takes to neutralize or dismantle oppressive systems. If this is what the obligation to resist one’s own oppression were to require of us, it would simply be too onerous. Resisting one’s own oppression is heroic, certainly, but one might argue that it simply isn’t reasonable to say that failing to resist makes someone immoral or blameworthy.

To address this line of objection, I argue that the obligation to resist one’s own oppression is an imperfect duty and that, as a result, someone isn’t obligated to do whatever it takes to neutralize or dismantle the systems that oppress her; and it might be that she isn’t
obligated to resist oppression every time she is oppressed either. I begin by presenting a number of apparent problems for my view, each of which is motivated by the concern that a duty to resist one’s own oppression would be, in some way, too demanding. I then introduce the Kantian conception of imperfect duties and show how these duties are able to permit different kinds of latitude in action. I conclude by returning to the initial objections and showing how this latitude in action permitted by imperfect duties means that an imperfect duty to resist one’s own oppression need not fall prey to any of the concerns raised by these objections.

FOUR OBJECTIONS

I’ll begin by considering four objections to my view. Each of these objections amounts to an argument for a version of the claim that an obligation to resist oppression would be too demanding. These objections are the objection from risk, the objection from blaming the victim, the objection from ought implies can, and the objection from supererogation.

1. The Objection from Risk

I’ve argued, remember, that the obligation to resist oppression is an obligation that people have to themselves to protect their rational capacities from the harms of oppression. According to the objection from risk, there cannot be a general obligation to resist oppression because resisting oppression can sometimes endanger the victim. The thought here is that because in certain oppressive contexts taking action to protect one’s rational capacities can be dangerous or counterproductive, refraining from acting to protect one’s rational capacities might actually be the best way to protect them. Sometimes not resisting your oppression can be a better way to protect your rational capacities from oppression’s
harms than resisting it can be. The dangers of resisting oppression could take the form of harms that are purely mental, or they could take the form of mental harms that are physically induced. These dangers could come from being made to experience feelings of exhaustion or victimization, or they could come from facing the retribution of others. All of these possibilities have to do with this obligation’s apparent requirement to resist oppression in every instance, whenever one is able.

For example, attempting to resist every instance of oppression—by, say, attempting to neutralize or dismantle every oppressive social institution or by attempting to change the behaviour of every single oppressor—could be potentially exhausting or could lead to a sense of victimization that could leave oppressed people unable to appreciate their own potential for resisting oppression. Feelings of exhaustion or victimization could, in effect, damage oppressed people’s rational capacities by leading to depression or feelings of helplessness that could undermine their ability to set or pursue their ends. This might be what Native Companion, from Chapter 1, has in mind when she expresses her desire to do nothing to resist her oppression at the hands of the carnies. Perhaps she recognizes on some level that, because oppressive situations like this one are so common, being required to mount resistance to every situation like this one would be exhausting or victimizing. This exhaustion could, for example, make it difficult for someone to do what she judges to be best because she lacks the energy or inner strength to act effectively on her judgements; this kind of exhaustion would thus be conducive to a kind of practical irrationality. This victimization could, for example, make it difficult for someone to do what she judges to be best because her trust in her ability to make her own decisions has been undermined; this kind of victimization would thus be conducive to a kind of practical irrationality.
Perhaps what Native Companion is chafing against, then, is the implication that she could be obligated to do something that would subject her to these sorts of harms. In cases like this, it seems, resisting oppression does not necessarily protect one’s rational capacities. And so because obligating people to resist their oppression would sometimes be obligating them to undergo a particular kind of harm to their rational capacities, and because the obligation here is supposed to be an obligation to protect these capacities, there cannot be a general obligation to resist oppression.

In addition to the harms that result from having to resist oppression in every instance, there are other harms that could result from attempting to resist certain specific instances of oppression. The cases I have in mind are those where resistance could expose oppressed people to severe physical harm, to death, or to expulsion from their only community. Were the Sufi Pirzada women discussed in Chapter 1, for example, to resist their oppression by refusing to participate in socially mandated veiling and seclusion they could face serious consequences. If these women were to refuse to wear the burqa, or if they were to go out in public without the accompaniment of a male relative, there’s a very real possibility they could be subject to severe punishment. They could be accused of dishonouring themselves and their families, or of betraying their community and its religious commitments. These accusations could lead to retributive harms: beatings, expulsion from their community, even murder. These retributive harms could, among other things, damage these women’s rational capacities. So, again, because obligating people to resist their oppression would sometimes be obligating them to undergo harms to their rational capacities, and because the obligation here is supposed to be an obligation to protect these capacities, there cannot be a general obligation to resist oppression that’s based on the obligation to defend one’s rational capacities.
2. The Objection from Blaming the Victim

According to the objection from blaming the victim, an obligation to resist oppression is unfair because the victim hasn’t done anything wrong. Given that someone who has been oppressed has been subjected to a moral harm, I admit that it seems strange to suggest that this imposes moral obligations on the harm’s victim, instead of the harm’s perpetrator. We need to recognize that a person who has been oppressed suffers real harm—psychological, social, emotional, and material harm—and we need to recognize that saying that she has an obligation to resist her oppression is to identify a further burden that’s imposed upon her. Because an oppressed person hasn’t done anything wrong, it is unfair to demand that she take on the burden of trying to rectify the situation, one might hold. We should, instead, recognize that oppressive social factors have left her with enough on her plate and that the last thing she needs is to be answerable to further moral demands.

Anita Superson is someone who makes such an argument. She argues that women who acquiesce in their oppression by conforming to patriarchal gender roles ought not to be blamed for this acquiescence. Superson thinks this is the case even though she admits that this acquiescence contributes not only to the oppression of those who conform, but also to the oppression of all women. She argues that it is unfair to say that these women have an obligation to resist oppression because “their choice of lifestyle, and the values and beliefs accompanying it, … takes place in the context of severe restrictions of their freedom caused mainly by patriarchy. Their lifestyle, in turn, significantly limits their choices further.” To say that they have an obligation to change is to “expect them to act in ways that restrict their choices even further,” and would be tantamount to blaming the victim.

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But what, exactly, is wrong with blaming the victim? Jean Harvey argues that all morally objectionable practices of blaming the victim share three features in common: first, someone (the victim) is harmed in some way; second, in attempting to explain the harm, the victim is focused on in an “inappropriate and typically unflattering way”; and third, the act of blaming the victim is itself damaging to the victim. Victim-blaming can be morally objectionable in a number of ways, Harvey argues. It’s morally objectionable to blame a victim who is innocent, for example, whether the accusation is one of negligence or something worse. It’s morally objectionable to shift some or all of the moral accountability away from the perpetrator who has actually harmed the victim. It’s morally objectionable to claim that some nonmoral failing on the victim’s part played a major role in the situation. It’s morally objectionable to pretend that a victim has the power safely to do something about the situation, when she does not. It’s morally objectionable to urge a victim into problematic relationships with other people or into a diminished moral status within her community at large. And it’s morally objectionable to urge a victim to do things that will ultimately diminish her self-respect.

If an obligation to resist oppression results in the victims of oppression being blamed in any of these morally objectionable ways, that would be reason to reject the existence of such an obligation. And there is certainly a danger of this happening. If there is an obligation to resist oppression, after all, then those who fail to resist their oppression will be the appropriate subjects of blame. This would be to blame the victims of oppression for failing to live up to certain of their obligations. The concern, then, is that failing to live up to

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3 Harvey, 85-86.
the obligation to resist oppression would result in oppressed people being blamed in one or more of these morally objectionable ways.

3. The Objection from Ought Implies Can

According to the objection from *ought implies can*, the obligation to resist oppression founders on logistical considerations. In many different oppressive social situations, for any one of a number of different reasons, an oppressed person simply cannot resist her oppression. And, the argument goes, if someone *cannot* resist her oppression then it can’t be that she *ought* to.

One reason it sometimes seems logistically impossible to resist oppression has to do with how prevalent oppressive social institutions are. Frye’s birdcage analogy that we saw in Chapter 2 illustrates just how ubiquitous oppression is: the harms of oppression surround a victim like the wires in a cage. Oppression infects virtually every aspect of its victims’ lives: it is present in institutional structures, in interpersonal interactions, and even in the very ways they are able to think, speak, and feel. Its effects are present in the family, in the academy, in religion, in popular culture, in the workplace. Given this ubiquity, one might hold that it’s just not logistically possible for someone to resist oppression by attempting to neutralize or dismantle every oppressive social institution. There simply aren’t enough hours in the day. And so if one cannot resist oppression then it can’t be that she ought to.

Another reason it’s sometimes not logistically possible to resist oppression is that in some cases resisting oppression requires the cooperation of others. Sometimes there is literally nothing one can do to resist one’s oppression unless other members of one’s oppressed group are willing to resist as well. Ann Cudd gives an example of this sort of case:
If you are the only worker at the plant who is willing to strike, then it cannot be a duty for you to strike, since your action will likely be ineffective even in sending a message of revolt (e.g., if you just look like a shirker). And if striking (when others strike) is the only course of resistance in this case, then it cannot be a duty to resist.

Because an individual worker cannot strike alone—because her actions will not count as striking unless other people take similar actions—her successful resistance is in an importance sense contingent on the actions of others. The point here, to be clear, is not simply that effective resistance requires solidarity from others; the point is that regardless of how effective your actions are in affecting an oppressive institution, the actions will not even qualify as resistance unless others are resisting with you. In such a case, if others are unwilling to cooperate, then one cannot resist her oppression. So it can’t be that she ought to.

A final reason it’s sometimes not logistically possible to resist oppression is that the harms of oppression can damage someone’s rational capacities so severely that she is incapable of resisting. Severe harms to someone’s capacity for rational deliberation, of the sort we considered in Chapter 2, could have this effect. Deprivation of the basic educational resources needed at key developmental stages; long-term cognitive damage resulting from malnutrition at key developmental stages; extreme dependence resulting from infantilization; internalized feelings of worthlessness; depression; incapacitation resulting from being institutionalized, medicated, or lobotomized: these, and other, effects of oppression could render someone literally unable to resist. Severe cases of oppression can so thoroughly damage an oppressed person’s rational capacities that acts of resistance are

not merely difficult for her but are actually impossible. And, again, if one cannot resist oppression then it can’t be that she ought to.

4. The Objection from Supererogation

According to the final objection I want to consider, resisting oppression is supererogatory rather than obligatory. The objection from supererogation shares with my account the recognition that resisting one’s oppression is sometimes possible, and when so, is a morally good thing to do. But, instead of characterizing resisting oppression as an obligation, a proponent of this view contends that resisting oppression is, in general, better thought of as supererogatory. This is because such a proponent thinks there are various reason to think that there cannot be a general obligation to resist oppression. The clearest proponent of the supererogatory view of resisting oppression is Ann Cudd. As we saw in Chapter 3, Cudd explicitly denies that resistance to oppression is always obligatory. Instead, she argues that one has an obligation to resist oppression only when failing to do so harms other members of one’s oppressed group. When there is a duty to resist oppression, then, this is a duty one has to others, not a duty one has to oneself. In cases where acquiescing in one’s oppression harms only oneself, resistance is supererogatory rather than obligatory.

Cudd’s justification for finding it implausible that people could have an obligation to resist their own oppression appeals to certain practical considerations. Many of these considerations are actually versions of the other objections we’ve just considered. Cudd argues, for example, that because oppressed people are often not in a position to know that they are oppressed—because “it is often a part of their oppression that it is hidden from

5 Cudd, 187-221.
them under the guises of tradition or divine command or the natural order of things”⁶,⁷—it will be difficult for these people to know how to go about resisting their oppression. She also points out that the pervasiveness of oppression means that it is impossible for someone who is oppressed to resist all of it simultaneously. And, as we just saw, she points out that because effective resistance to oppression is sometimes only possible in concerted effort with others, individual members of oppressed groups are powerless to resist unless other members of their oppressed group will act in solidarity with them. These are all versions of the objection from *ought implies can*. Furthermore, Cudd argues that the coercive nature of oppression—the fact that oppressed people are put in oppressive circumstances through no fault of their own—should mitigate oppressed people’s responsibility to ameliorate the situation. This is a version of the objection from *blaming the victim*.

These practical considerations are sufficient to undermine the possibility of there being a general obligation to resist one’s oppression, Cudd thinks. But she admits that resisting one’s own oppression is usually still a good thing, despite being unwilling to argue that oppressed people are obligated to resist. In general, then, she thinks resisting one’s oppression is, at most, *supererogatory*.

There are certain cases of oppression, however, for which Cudd doesn’t think the obligation to resist is merely supererogatory. As we saw in Chapter 3, the cases she has in mind are not those where failing to resist oppression harms oneself—these seem to be

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⁶ Cudd, 198.

⁷ Cudd clearly has in mind here something like Sandra Bartky’s concept of *mystification*—“the systematic obscuring of both the reality and agencies of psychological oppression so that its intended effect, the depreciated self, is lived out as destiny, guilt, or neurosis.” See Sandra Bartky, “On Psychological Oppression,” *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 23.
harm Cudd is willing to let people undergo willingly—but those cases where failing to resist oppression harms others:

In [certain cases of] oppression … the alternative to resistance is participation in the oppressive institution. By participating in an oppressive situation, one lends some strength and stability to it, perhaps even legitimates it to some degree. … One has only two options in such cases: resist or strengthen the unjust institution. Thus, in [these] cases of oppression … failing to resist harms others.8

Resistance to oppression in cases like these is not supererogatory, Cudd thinks. When failing to resist oppression amounts to participation in and legitimization of oppressive social structures that harm all members of an oppressed group, each individual member of that group has an obligation to resist. But it’s important to notice that the obligation here is one oppressed people have to each other, not one they have to themselves. Insofar as an act of resisting oppression stands to benefit only the individual performing it, the resistance is perhaps morally praiseworthy but it is never morally required. So, even for the overlapping cases where both Cudd and I agree that people have an obligation to resist oppression, Cudd’s account of why they have this obligation differs from mine. For her, the duty to resist opposition is a duty one has to prevent harms to others, not a duty to prevent harms to oneself. Cudd thinks resistance to one’s own oppression is, in general, supererogatory.

According to these four objections—the objection from risk, the objection from blaming the victim, the objection from ought implies can, and the objection from supererogation—there cannot be a general duty to resist one’s own oppression because such a duty would be, in some way, too demanding. My responses to these four objections will rely heavily on Kant’s understanding of the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. Before

8 Cudd, 199-200.
developing these responses, therefore, we need to take a close look at Kant's treatment of this distinction.

KANT ON PERFECT AND IMPERFECT DUTIES

Kant’s practical philosophy contains a highly worked-out system of duties; what grounds, or explains and justifies, all these duties is the duty to respect humanity. This duty is what requires us to comply with every other duty. With the duty to respect humanity at the centre of his moral framework, Kant divides every other duty into many different categories. The distinction that is most central for our purposes here, however, is his distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. Kant first distinguishes between perfect and imperfect duties in the *Groundwork*, where he says that a perfect duty “admits no exception in favor of inclination” (G 4:422). We are left to infer from this, presumably, that imperfect duties do allow certain exceptions. But Kant doesn’t really say much about what sorts of exceptions he has in mind until later, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. There, in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant distinguishes duties primarily on the basis of the manner and degree in which they obligate people. To do this, Kant adds to the *Groundwork*’s terminology of perfect and imperfect duties a characterization of these same duties as either wide or narrow. Because imperfect duties are “wider” than perfect duties, their distinguishing feature is that they permit a wider range of acceptable actions in fulfilling them than is the case for perfect duties. This is because

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10 “The wider the duty, … the more imperfect is a man’s obligation to action; as he, nevertheless, brings closer to narrow duty (duties of right) the maxim of complying with wide duty (in his disposition), so much the more perfect is his virtuous action” (*DV* 6:390).
(unlike perfect duties) imperfect duties are not, strictly speaking, duties to perform specific
actions. Rather, imperfect duties are duties to adopt certain general maxims (or rules of action).
These maxims can be satisfied by more than one action. Imperfect duties thus allow a
latitude of choice that perfect duties do not. In Kant’s words, imperfect duties leave
“[elbow-room] (latitude) for free choice in following (complying with) the law, that is, that
the law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act and how much one is to do by the
action for an end that is also a duty” (DV 6:390).

That imperfect duties permit latitude in action is not a matter of dispute. But exactly
how much and what kind of latitude comes with each of these duties is left very much up in the
air by Kant. Imperfect duties “cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act” but is
there nothing we can say about the specific actions prescribed by the different imperfect
duties? Imperfect duties “cannot specify precisely … how much one is to do,” but is there
nothing we can say about how often we have to act or how much we have to do to fulfill
them?

I want to focus on two different kinds of latitude that can be permitted by imperfect
duties. One kind of latitude someone might have is latitude to decide between various

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11 One high-profile dispute on this matter, for example, takes place between Hill and Baron. Hill, in
“Imperfect Duty and Supererogation,” argues that the imperfect duty to perfect ourselves and the
imperfect duty to promote the happiness of others both require us to perform a certain number of
actions to fulfill them, but after a point any performances of actions to fulfill these duties are
supererogatory. (Cited above in note 9.) Baron, on the other hand, defends an interpretation of
Kant’s imperfect duties that permits less latitude than Hill’s. She argues that the duty to perfect
oneself morally, while imperfect, is much stricter than the duty to promote the happiness of others:
one must fulfill the former duty before the latter, and one has much less latitude in when and how to
act to fulfill it. See Marcia Baron, “Latitude in Kant’s Imperfect Duties,” Kantian Ethics (Almost)

12 Hill’s account of the different kinds of latitude that could be permitted by Kant’s
imperfect duties is probably the best accepted in the literature. The two kinds of latitude I
focus on here are both articulated by Hill. See Hill, “Kant on Imperfect Duty and
Supererogation,” 155 ff. (Cited above in note 9.)
different ways of acting in a particular situation to satisfy a maxim required by an imperfect duty. Call this kind of latitude *latitude in which action to take*. Someone could fulfill the imperfect duty to be beneficent, for example, by working at a soup kitchen or by donating to Planned Parenthood or by giving used clothing to the Goodwill. The duty of beneficence doesn’t require any of these acts in particular; it just requires that we do *something* that is beneficent. Because imperfect duties are duties to adopt general maxims, not duties to perform specific actions, all imperfect duties permit this kind of latitude.

A second kind of latitude someone might have is latitude to choose either to perform or to refrain from performing an action on a particular occasion, so long as she stands ready to perform the given sort of action on at least some other occasions. Call this kind of latitude *latitude in refraining from action*. Someone could count as fulfilling the imperfect duty to be beneficent, for example, even if she refrained from performing all of the above-mentioned beneficent actions on a given occasion, as long as she doesn’t always refrain from acting beneficently.

But how often can one refrain? Just how often does one have to act, and just how much does one have to do, to fulfill an imperfect duty? Some of the possible ways to interpret this second kind of latitude are that: (i) imperfect duties tell us only which maxims we are to adopt and give us no guidance about how often or how much we have to do to fulfill them; (ii) imperfect duties tell us which maxims we are to adopt, they give us precise guidance about how often or how much we have to do to fulfill them, and this guidance tells us to do as much as possible, as often as possible, to fulfill each of them; and (iii) imperfect duties tell us which maxims we are to adopt, they give us precise guidance about how often or how much we have to do to fulfill them, and this guidance tells us we don’t have to do as
much as possible, as often as possible, to fulfill some or all of them. I think the last option is the most plausible: as we’ll see in a moment, there’s an overwhelming amount of textual evidence to support the interpretation according to which there is a great deal of variety in the kinds and degrees of latitude permitted by different imperfect duties. Kant is, unfortunately, less clear than we would like about how best to characterize imperfect duties. But what is clear, I think, is that there isn’t a general story to be told about the latitude all the imperfect duties have. Instead, we have to look at the duties individually.

Kant characterizes the imperfect duty of beneficence, for example, as a relatively wide imperfect duty. The duty of beneficence is the duty to promote others’ happiness, so it requires us to adopt the “maxim of making others’ happiness [our] end” (DV 6:452). We go about following this maxim by taking another person’s ends as our own. Taking another’s ends as your own—being concerned with their happiness and well-being—requires helping them achieve whatever it is they’ve decided they want to achieve. This imperfect duty thus permits latitude both in which actions to take to fulfill it (because which actions you take will to fulfill this duty will depend, in part, on what the other person’s ends are) and in not having to act in every instance (because, at the very least, you are not bound by beneficence

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13 Baron spells out many more possible interpretations of what imperfect duties require in the first “Interlude” in her Kantian Ethics (Almost) Without Apology, 82-87. (Cited above in note 11.)

14 “The duty of love for one’s neighbor can … be expressed as the duty to make others’ ends my own (provided only that these are not immoral)” (DV 6:450).

15 “When it comes to my promoting happiness as an end that is also a duty, this must therefore be the happiness of other human beings, whose (permitted) end I thus make my own end as well. It is for them to decide what they count as belonging to their happiness; but it is open to me to refuse them many things that they think will make them happy but that I do not, as long as they have no right to demand them from me as what is theirs” (DV 6:388).
to expend so many of your resources that you yourself “would finally come to need the
beneficence of others” (DV 6:454)).

The imperfect duty to have an attitude of respect toward others, on the other hand, permits
much less latitude than the duty of beneficence. This duty forbids using another person as
a means to your ends; it also forbids thinking that you are better than another person (and
thus thinking that your ends are more important than theirs). Kant spells this duty out only
negatively—only in terms of the vices it forbids. (The vices in question are arrogance,
defamation, and ridicule.) The duty to have an attitude of respect toward others permits no
latitude in refraining from action—any failure to act to fulfill this duty counts as a vice. But,
because of its general specification (and thus its latitude in permitting different actions to
fulfill it), the duty to have an attitude of respect toward others is still an imperfect duty.

Moreover, a duty of free respect toward others is, strictly speaking, only a negative one (of not
exalting oneself above others) and is thus analogous to the duty of right not to encroach upon what
belongs to anyone. Hence, although it is a mere duty of virtue, it is regarded as narrow in comparison
with the duty of love, and it is the latter that is considered a wide duty (DV 6:449-450).

The duty of respect for my neighbor is contained in the maxim not to degrade any other to a
mere means to my ends (not to demand that another throw himself away in order to slave for my
end)” (DV 6:450).

Failing to fulfill mere duties of love is lack of virtue (peccatum). But failure to fulfill the duty arising
from the respect owed to every human being as such is a vice (vitium). For no one is wronged if duties
of love are neglected; but a failure in the duty of respect infringes upon one’s lawful claim. – The
first violation is opposed to duty as its contrary (contrarie oppositum virtutis). But what not only adds
nothing moral but even abolishes the worth of what would otherwise be to the subject’s good is vice.

For this reason, too, duties to one’s fellow human beings arising from the respect due them are
expressed only negatively, that is, this duty of virtue will be expressed only indirectly (through the
prohibition of its opposite)” (DV 6:465).

It will be noticed that under the above heading virtues were not so much commended as rather
the vices opposed to them censured. But this is already implicit in the concept of the respect we are
bound to show other human beings, which is only a negative duty. I am not bound to revere others
(regarded merely as human beings), that is, to show them positive high esteem. The only reverence to
which I am bound by nature is reverence for the law as such (revere legem); and to revere the law, but
not to revere other human beings in general (reverential adversus hominem) or to perform some acts of
reverence for them, is a human being’s universal and unconditional duty toward others, which each
of them can require as the respect originally owed others (observantia debita)” (DV 6:468).
The imperfect duties of self-perfection—the duty to develop your natural talents and the duty to increase your moral perfection—also permit different amounts of latitude. The imperfect duty to develop your natural talents requires you to develop your mental and physical capacities—everything from your analytical skills, memory, and imagination, to the physical powers of your body—so that you are as well-prepared as possible to do that which makes you distinctively valuable (i.e., to set ends). This duty permits a lot of both kinds of latitude: you have latitude in which actions to take to fulfill this imperfect duty (because which capacities you choose to cultivate will depend on which ends you have) and in refraining from action to fulfill it (because you don’t need to act in every possible instance to cultivate your powers—training doesn’t work that way). The duty to increase your moral

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20 “The capacity to set oneself an end—any end whatsoever—is what characterizes humanity (as distinguished from animality). Hence there is also bound up with the end of humanity in our own person the rational will, and so the duty, to make ourselves worthy of humanity by culture in general, by procuring or promoting the capacity to realize all sorts if possible ends, so far as this is to be found in a human being himself. In other words, the human being has a duty to cultivate the crude predispositions of his nature, by which the animal is first raised into the human being. It is therefore a duty in itself” (DV 6:392).

21 “A human being has a duty to himself to cultivate (culta) his natural powers (powers of spirit, mind, and body), as a means to all sorts of possible ends. – He owes it to himself (as a rational being) not to leave idle and, as it were, rusting away the natural predispositions and capacities that his reason can someday use. Even supposing that he could be satisfied with the innate scope of his capacities for his natural needs, his reason must first show him, by principles, that this meager scope of his capacities is unsatisfactory; for, as a being capable of ends (of making objects his ends), he must owe the use of his powers not merely to natural instinct but rather to the freedom by which he determines their scope. Hence the basis on which he should develop his capacities (for all sorts of ends) is not regard for the advantages that their cultivation can provide; for the advantage might (according to Rousseau’s principles) turn out on the side of his crude natural needs. Instead, it is a command of morally practical reason and a duty of a human being to himself to cultivate his capacities (some among them more than others, insofar as people have different ends), and to be in a pragmatic respect a human being equal to the end of his existence” (DV 6:445).

22 “But this duty is a merely ethical one, that is, a duty of wide obligation. No moral principle prescribes specifically how far one should go in cultivating one’s capacities (in enlarging or correcting one’s capacity for understanding, i.e., in acquiring knowledge or skill). Then too, the different situations in which human beings find themselves make a man’s choice of the occupation for which he should cultivate his talents very much a matter for him to decide as he chooses. With regard to natural perfection, accordingly, there is no law of reason for actions but only a law for maxims of
**perfection** requires you to strive to act always from duty—to have the incentive of your actions be the only the moral law, to do what is right for its own sake. How much latitude Kant thinks the imperfect duty to increase your moral perfection permits isn’t something I’ve been able to make complete sense of. At the very least, given the primacy of the moral over the actions, which runs as follows: ‘Cultivate your powers of mind and body so that they are fit to realize any ends you might encounter,’ however uncertain you are which of them could sometimes become yours” (DV 6:392).

23 “Which of these natural perfections should take precedence, and in what proportion one against the other it may be a human being’s duty to himself to make these natural perfections his end, are matters left for him to choose in accordance with his own rational reflection about what sort of life we would like to lead and whether he has the powers necessary for it (e.g., whether it should be a trade, commerce or a learned profession). For, quite apart from the need to maintain himself, which in itself cannot establish a duty, a human being has a duty to himself to be a useful member of the world, since this also belongs to the worth of humanity in his own person, which he ought not to degrade.

But a human being’s duty to himself regarding his natural perfection is only a wide and imperfect duty; for while it does contain a law for the maxim of actions, it determines nothing about the kind and extent of actions themselves but allows a latitude for free choice” (DV 6:446).

24 “The greatest perfection of a human being is to do his duty from duty (for the law to be not only the rule but also the incentive of his actions). — At first sight this looks like a narrow obligation, and the principle of duty seems to prescribe with the precision and strictness of a law not only the legality but also the morality of every action, that is, the disposition. But in fact the law, here again, prescribes only the maxim of the action, that of seeking the basis of obligation solely in the law and not in sensible impulse (advantage or disadvantage), and hence not the action itself” (DV 6:393).

25 “First, this perfection consists subjectively in the purity (puritas moralis) of one’s disposition to duty, namely, in the law being by itself alone the incentive, even without the admixture of aims derived from sensibility, and in actions being done not only in conformity with duty but also from duty. Here the command is ‘be holy.’ Second, as having to do with one’s entire moral end, such perfection consists objectively in fulfilling all one’s duties and in attaining completely one’s moral end with regard to oneself. Here the command is ‘be perfect.’ …

This duty to oneself is a narrow and perfect one in terms of its quality; but it is wide and imperfect in terms of its degree, because of the frailty (fragilitas) of human nature.

It is a human being’s duty to strive for this perfection, but not to reach it (in this life), and his compliance with duty can, accordingly, consist only in continual progress. Hence while this duty is indeed narrow and perfect with regard to its object (the idea that one should make it one’s end to realize), with regard to the subject it is only a wide and imperfect duty to himself” (DV 6:447).

26 Baron argues, persuasively I think, that this duty permits the least amount of latitude in refraining from action of all the imperfect duties. “Kant intends the duty to perfect oneself morally to have less latitude than the duty to promote others’ happiness and less than the duty to develop one’s natural talents. His wording suggests that we are to do all we can to make ourselves (morally) better people,
non-moral in Kant’s system, you’d think this duty would require people to act in more instances than the duty of natural perfection. But this duty must still permit latitude in what actions to take to fulfill it, if only because differences in people’s characters will require different actions from them in achieving this end. So while this duty permits less latitude in refraining from action to fulfill it than other imperfect duties, it still permits latitude in which actions to take to fulfill it.

Because imperfect duties are duties to adopt general maxims, not duties to perform particular actions, all imperfect duties have latitude in which action to take. One may, for example, perform any of a number of different actions to satisfy the imperfect duty to

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27 “For a human being cannot see into the depths of his own heart so as to be quite certain, in even a single action, of the purity of his moral intention and the sincerity of his disposition, even when he has no doubt about the legality of the action. Very often he mistakes his own weakness, which counsels him against the venture of a misdeed, for virtue (which is the concept of strength); and how many people who have lived long and guiltless lives may not be merely fortunate in having escaped so many temptations? In the case of any deed it remains hidden from the agent himself how much pure moral content there has been in his disposition.

Hence this duty too—the duty of assessing the worth of one’s actions not only by their legality alone but also by their morality (one’s disposition)—is of only wide obligation. The law does not prescribe this inner action in the human mind but only the maxim of the action, to strive with all one’s might that the thought of duty for its own sake is the sufficient incentive of every action conforming to duty” (DV 6:393).

28 “The depths of the human heart are unfathomable. Who knows himself well enough to say, when he feels the incentive to fulfill his duty, whether it proceeds entirely from the representation of the law or whether there are not many other sensible impulses contributing to it that look to one’s advantage (or to avoiding what is detrimental) and that, in other circumstances, could just as well serve vice? — But with regard to perfection as a moral end, it is true that in its idea (objectively) there is only one virtue (as moral strength of one’s maxims); but in fact (subjectively) there is a multitude of virtues, made up of several different qualities, and it would probably be impossible not to find in it some lack of virtue, if one wanted to look for it (though, because of those virtues, such other qualities are not usually called vices). But a sum of virtues such that our cognition of ourselves can never adequately tell us whether it is complete or deficient can be the basis only of an imperfect duty to be perfect.

All duties to oneself regarding the end of humanity in our own person, are, therefore, only imperfect duties” (DV 6:447).
develop one’s talents. But not all imperfect duties have latitude in refraining from action.

While the duty to develop one’s talents does have this kind of latitude—one may refrain from acting to satisfy this duty in any given situation, as long as one doesn’t refrain all the time—other imperfect duties, such as the duty to have an attitude of respect toward others and the duty to perfect oneself morally, do not allow this kind of latitude. Kant does not think that one is free to choose to have an attitude of respect others only some of the time. Nor, it seems, does he think one is free to attempt to act from duty rather than inclination only some of the time. But that does not make these duties perfect: they are, after all, still duties to adopt general maxims, not duties to perform specific actions.

To be clear, whatever latitude Kant attributes to imperfect duties, he does not mean to imply that the fulfillment of these duties is in any sense optional. The latitude here is of a much different sort. Kant thinks we have a non-optional obligation to fulfill every imperfect duty that applies to us; it’s just that this obligation is a general one, and it cannot be neatly translated into an obligation to perform any particular action. Why? First of all, because both the kind and degree of action we can take in fulfilling an imperfect duty depends on contingent details about our particular circumstances and talents. And, furthermore, our ability to fulfill an imperfect duty in any given circumstance is going to depend on whatever other duties—perfect or imperfect—we happen to have, and on whether an action that fulfills the former precludes actions fulfilling the latter. So it’s not that Kant thinks that imperfect duties are optional; rather, he thinks they are limited or restricted by other duties: “a wide [or imperfect] duty is not to be taken as permission to make exceptions to the maxim of actions

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29 Kant does, at one point in the *Lecture on Ethics*, say that imperfect duties “may also be called neglectable or better optional duties” (*LE* 330), but I don’t think there’s any reason to think this represents his fully considered view on the matter.
but only as permission to limit one maxim of duty by another (e.g., love of one’s neighbor in general by love of one’s parents), by which in fact the field for the practice of virtue is widened” (*DV* 6:390). We may limit the number of occasions in which we are prepared to act on a given imperfect duty because we have another duty (perfect or imperfect). Indeed, we must be prepared to do this. There are only so many hours in a day, after all.

If I’m right about this, then, Kant thinks different imperfect duties permit different kinds and degrees of latitude. There isn’t a general story to be told about the latitude permitted by imperfect duties. So, if we want to know how much and what kind of latitude the imperfect duty to resist one’s own oppression has, we need to examine this duty in closer detail. We need to look at the different sorts of situations this duty will arise in. We need to look at what the likely consequences will be of acting in a particular way to fulfill this duty. We need to look at what the likely consequences will be of refraining from acting at all to fulfill this duty. Because all imperfect duties have latitude in which action to take, the duty to resist oppression will have this latitude. As we’ll see, this will be enough to answer many of the objections we’re concerned with. Whether the duty to resist oppression also permits latitude in refraining from action will not be quite as clear. But we’ll see why this is so in a moment.

**The Obligation to Resist One’s Oppression as an Imperfect Duty**

To say that the duty to resist one’s oppression is imperfect is not to suggest that it is less stringent or less important than other duties. Instead, calling this duty imperfect means that there is a strict duty to set the end of resisting one’s own oppression, but there can be more than one way to go about pursuing this end. What the imperfect duty to resist one’s
oppression rules out is the refusal to do anything to resist one’s oppression. That is, it rules out acquiescing in one’s oppression.

Before we consider how much and what kind of latitude the imperfect duty to resist one’s own oppression should have within a Kantian framework, I want to take a step back to consider a potential textual objection to the characterization of this duty as imperfect. Remember, I’ve characterized the obligation to resist one’s oppression as an obligation to protect one’s rational capacities from the harms of oppression. Given that the obligation to respect these capacities is supposed to be the duty that grounds all others on the Kantian picture, it might come as a surprise that I want to characterize the duty to resist one’s oppression as an imperfect, rather than a perfect, duty. How can this be an imperfect duty, if we’re talking about humanity here? Doesn’t Kant say the duty to respect humanity is perfect?30 Shouldn’t the fundamental importance of rational nature mean that we have a strict, exceptionless duty to protect it? Consider the following passage from the *Doctrine of Virtue*:

> The first, though not the principal, duty of a human being to himself as an animal being is to preserve himself in his animal nature. The contrary of this is willful physical death or killing oneself (*autochiria*), which can be thought of as either total, suicide (*suicidium*), or only partial, mutilating oneself. Mutilating oneself can in turn be either material, depriving oneself of certain integral, organic parts, that is, maiming oneself, or formal, depriving oneself (permanently or temporarily) of one’s capacity for the natural (and so indirectly for the moral) use of one’s powers (DV 6:421).

This duty to not deprive yourself of your rational capacities is a perfect duty, Kant says. Allowing your rational capacities to be damaged is a kind of self-mutilation, which is a failing that is akin to suicide. I think this passage rules out fairly definitively the possibility that Kant himself would be happy to call the duty to resist one’s oppression (as I’ve characterized

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30 Thanks to Sigrún Svavarsdóttir for raising this objection.
it, as a duty to protect one’s rational capacities) an imperfect duty. It’s clear from this passage that Kant would characterize the duty to resist oppression, as a duty to protect one’s rational capacities, as a perfect duty. Depriving yourself of the capacity for the use of your rational powers is, for all intents and purposes, the very harm we’ve been talking about—it’s letting your rational capacities be damaged.

Other things Kant says about the duties we have to ourselves also suggest that he’d characterize the duty to resist oppression as perfect rather than imperfect. Take, for example, what he says about the duty to avoid servility. The vice of servility consists in displaying a public and systematic willingness to disavow one’s equal moral status; Kant argues that the duty to avoid this vice is perfect (DV6:434-436). As we saw in Chapter 3, Thomas Hill has argued that acquiescing in one’s oppression is a kind of servility; this means, presumably, that if Hill thinks there is a duty to resist oppression he must, insofar as he wishes to follow Kant, think this duty is a perfect one.

I’m forced here, I concede, to admit that Kant would think the duty to resist one’s oppression is a perfect duty. Nevertheless, while Kant himself would characterize this duty as perfect, I hope to make a case for a Kantian to be able to characterize it as imperfect. And if I can do this, if I can defend a plausible interpretation of the duty to resist oppression as an imperfect duty, I’ll be in a good position to address the various objections we’re concerned with.

The first consideration that supports interpreting this duty as imperfect has to do with how Kant characterizes the difference between perfect and imperfect duties. Much of what Kant says suggests that he thinks of the difference between perfect and imperfect duties as a matter of degree rather than kind. Kant compares various duties as wider or narrower relative to each other. He says, for example, that the duty to respect others is
“narrow in comparison with the duty of love, and it is the latter that is considered a wide duty” (DV 6:449-450). He also says, for example, that, “[t]he wider the duty, … the more imperfect is a man’s obligation to action (DV 6:390).” In general, Kant speaks of duties as “wider” and “narrower,” not “wide” nor “narrow.” The picture I’m suggesting here is one where duties fall on a scale of wideness and narrowness and where the line between perfect and imperfect is not necessarily a clean one. Certain duties are clearly perfect and permit no latitude in which action to take nor in refraining from action, others are clearly imperfect and permit a great deal of both these kinds of latitude. But some duties are somewhere in between: some duties might permit a great deal of latitude in which action to take but no latitude in refraining from action, others might permit much less latitude in which action to take but permit some latitude in refraining from action. Given that I will end up characterizing the duty to resist oppression as a relatively narrow imperfect duty—permitting quite a bit of latitude in which actions fulfill it, but relatively little latitude in refraining from action—my account of this duty should count as Kantian, even if Kant himself would characterize the duty slightly differently. Interpreting the difference between perfect and imperfect duties as one of degree rather than kind means that the difference between Kant’s perfect duty to protect one’s rational capacities from mutilation and my relatively narrow imperfect duty to protect these capacities from the harms of oppression need not amount to a repudiation of my Kantian approach.

A second consideration that supports interpreting this duty as imperfect has to do with what Kant says about other imperfect duties we have toward rational nature. I’ve admitted that the textual evidence against my interpretation of the duty to protect rational nature as imperfect is clear. But while we cannot avoid interpreting Kant as saying we have a perfect duty not to harm rational capacities, we can still, at the same time, interpret him as
saying we have an imperfect duty to foster these capacities. We just saw that Kant says we have a perfect duty not to harm our rational capacities: he thinks depriving oneself of the capacity to use one’s rational powers is akin to murdering oneself and we have a perfect duty to ourselves not to let this happen \((DV\ 6:421)\). Elsewhere, however, Kant says that we have other imperfect duties that have to do with rational capacities: he says we have an imperfect duty to perfect these capacities in ourselves \((DV\ 6:387, 393, 445-447)\) and we have an imperfect duty to beneficently encourage the development of these capacities in others \((DV\ 6:388, 449-450)\). The imperfect duties of self-perfection and beneficence, I contend, can be thought of as duties to foster rational capacities, in ourselves and in others. We can show that the duty to resist oppression can be an imperfect duty by showing that protecting rational capacities is closer, in terms of the latitude it permits, to fostering them than it is to not harming them.

Kant never says explicitly that we have a duty to foster our rational capacities. But an account of our duty to foster our rational capacities is implicit in much of what he says about other duties we have toward our rational nature. I want to suggest that we think of the duty to foster humanity in terms of the duty of beneficence when it comes to the humanity in others and in terms of the duty of self-perfection when it comes to the humanity in oneself.

We can interpret beneficence as a duty to foster the rational capacities of others by focusing on how it requires taking the ends of another as your own \((DV\ 6:449-450)\). Taking another’s ends as your own—being concerned with their happiness and well-being—involves helping them achieve whatever it is they’ve decided they want to achieve \((DV\ 6:388)\). But this is usually, among other things, to help them foster their rational capacities.\(^{31}\) We

\(^{31}\) In certain circumstances, helping someone else might actually harm her rational capacities—by encouraging dependence or a lack of self-confidence, for example. We’ll consider some cases like
saw above that Kant characterizes the duty of beneficence as a *wide* imperfect duty: it permits latitude in which actions to take (because which actions you take will to fulfill this duty will depend, in part, on what the other person’s ends are) and in not having to act in every instance (because, at the very least, one is not bound by beneficence to expend so many of his resources that “he himself would finally come to need the beneficence of others” (*DV* 6:454)).

If I’m right in interpreting the duty of beneficence as, in part, a duty to foster others’ rational capacities, then Kant thinks that our duty to foster others’ rational capacities is imperfect. From this, I claim, we can infer that he could agree that our duty to *protect* others’ rational capacities—in cases where only a small, incremental harm is at stake—is similarly imperfect. For the same reasons he thinks there should be many ways we can act to fulfill the duty to foster others’ rational capacities, and for the same reasons he thinks we don’t have to act in every instance to fulfill the duty to foster others’ rational capacities, Kant could agree that the duty to protect others’ rational capacities permits these kinds of latitude. But I’ll leave this claim undefended, because the duties we’re most interested in are duties one has to oneself. It’s enough here to notice that there’s room for a Kantian to defend the view that the duty to protect other people’s rational nature permits as much latitude in action as the duty to foster their rational nature.

Let’s move on, then, to consider what Kant says about the duties we have to foster our own rational nature. I contend that we should interpret the imperfect duty of self-perfection as including, as one aspect, a duty to foster one’s own rational capacities. This

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interpretation makes sense if we focus on how the duty of self-perfection is a matter of cultivating our various powers for the sake of our rational nature. Kant says there are two kinds of duties of self-perfection: the duty to perfect our *natural talents* and the duty to increase our *moral perfection*. The duty to perfect our natural talents requires us to develop our mental and physical capacities—everything from analytical skills, memory, and imagination, to powers of the body—so that we are as well-prepared as possible to do that which makes us distinctively valuable (i.e., to set ends) (*DV* 6:392, 445). The duty to increase our moral perfection requires us to strive to act always from duty—to have the incentive of our actions be only the moral law, to do what is right for its own sake (*DV* 6:393). As we saw above, Kant thinks both of these duties of self-perfection permit latitude in action because they are both imperfect duties. When it comes to the duty to develop our natural talents, we have latitude in which action to take because which capacities we cultivate will depend on which ends we have, and we have latitude in refraining from action because we don’t need to act in every possible instance to cultivate our powers (*DV* 6:392, 446). When it comes to the duty to increase our moral perfection, we might not have much latitude in refraining from action, but we have at least some latitude in which action to take because there isn’t one way to go about becoming a better person that will work for all people (*DV* 6:393, 447).

Now, it might be that Kant himself wouldn’t accept the idea that someone’s practical rationality as such is something that admits of minor improvements or impairments. After all, the very idea suggests that one isn’t metaphysically free. Perhaps Kant’s view of the duty of self-perfection is that we are to improve parts of ourselves other than our practical rationality *per se*. If this is right, then my view differs from Kant’s in this respect: I contend

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32 Thanks to Tim Schroeder for pointing this out.
that practical rationality itself can be both harmed and improved. We considered a number of different ways this might happen in Chapter 2. These harms and improvements to our rational capacities are analogous to harms and improvements to our memory, imagination, etc.

Grant, then, that my interpretation of the duty of self-perfection as, in part, a duty to foster our rational capacities fits plausibly within a Kantian framework. According to this interpretation, a Kantian can characterize our duty to foster our rational capacities as imperfect. This opens up the possibility that our duty to protect our rational capacities could be similarly imperfect. Examining this possibility is what we’ll turn to next.

Just as the imperfect duties of fostering our rational capacities can permit both latitude in which action to take and latitude in refraining from action, the imperfect duty of protecting our rational capacities can permit a similar degree and kind of latitude. As I’ll go on to show next, there are many different ways to protect our rational capacities in oppressive contexts, and thus many different actions that count as fulfilling the duty to protect them. There might even be reason to think that we can protect rational capacities in oppressive contexts without acting in every instance, and can thus fulfill the duty to protect them while refraining from action on occasion. This latitude supplied by imperfect duty model will allow us to respond to the objections we’re concerned with.

**LATITUDE IN WHICH ACTION TO TAKE**

Insofar as the duty to resist one’s oppression is imperfect, it must allow some latitude in which actions can be said to satisfy it. But just what sort of actions might fulfill this duty? We saw in Chapter 2, remember, that oppression can damage one’s capacity for practical rationality, and thus harm one’s rational nature, in a number of ways. Because there is an
obligation to protect one’s rational nature, in cases where oppression harms (or threatens to harm) rational nature, one has an obligation to protect oneself from these harms. But, if one’s obligation is to protect oneself from such harms, what should someone who is oppressed actually do? I contend that, in most familiar circumstances, the main practical way to protect one’s rational nature from the harms of oppression is to resist one’s oppression. There are many different forms this resistance could take.

One could resist oppression by participating in some form of activism intended to engage with and ultimately change the social norms, roles, and institutions that make up the oppressive system. In at least some cases, for example, oppressed people can directly confront the individual or individuals who are actively oppressing them. This possibility was an option in one of the cases we considered in Chapter 1, where Native Companion could have confronted the men who sexually harassed her. Oppressed people can often also give time or money to organizations that are dedicated to dismantling oppressive social institutions. Sometimes people who are oppressed can both empower themselves and undermine the effectiveness of oppressive social roles by reappropriating derogatory stereotypes or language. People have attempted to do this (not uncontroversially) with words like “bitch,” “nigger,” and “faggot.” And in some cases the oppressed can take part in oppressive social institutions in ways that demonstrate that such institutions needn’t necessarily be oppressive. One could enter into a marriage of mutual respect, for example—one where both partners were committed to ensuring that each partner had an equal opportunity to pursue meaningful life projects and that the inevitable sacrifices and compromises of family life didn’t unfairly disadvantage one partner over the other—and thereby show that the institution of marriage itself isn’t necessarily oppressive, even if its most conventional forms function to entrench sexist oppression. This could undermine or
destabilize the conventionally oppressive norms of marriage by serving as an example for others to emulate.

Another way to resist oppression is to opt out of oppressive social norms, roles, and institutions. Oppressed people could boycott an oppressive institution, for example. Or they could opt out of oppressive social norms by refusing to conform to conventional modes of dress or behaviour. This happens, for example, when someone refuses to identify with conventional masculine and feminine gender norms and instead presents herself as androgynous or as the opposite gender of what she has conventionally been assigned according to her sex. Another option for oppressed people is to isolate themselves from their oppressors to foster solidarity with other members of their oppressed group. This sort of opting out could be as radical as lesbian separatism or as moderate as creating a women’s-only space on a college campus. Opting out can also occur when oppressed people refuse to behave in ways considered to be appropriate for members of their social group—when women are assertive, confident, or opinionated, for example. Opting out like this can be particularly effective for women, since many of the kinds of practical irrationality to which many women are especially prone in virtue of their oppression are those that involve a lack of confidence, or a lack of willingness to make a scene, or a lack of willingness to make someone else uncomfortable. And this sort of opting out permits a lot of latitude in which action to take: even if a woman doesn’t, say, stand up to someone who harasses her at a bar, if she puts her hand up in class or voices objections in a meeting at work, she’s undermining the kind of irrationalities that sexist oppression tends to inculcate.

Both engaging in activism and opting out are external forms of resisting oppression. But resistance to oppression could be internal as well: someone could, theoretically, fulfill the obligation to respect her rational nature by simply becoming the sort of person whose
rational nature just wasn’t damaged by oppression. An oppressed person could build up mental walls against many of the harms to her rational nature threatened by oppression. She could educate herself about the potential risks of these harms and be wary of their effects. She could simply refuse to believe what oppressive social messages are telling her about the character or worth of people like her.

In some cases, when every other form of resistance would subject her to harm (or the serious risk of harm), some form of internal resistance might be the only form of resistance that’s open to an oppressed person. You might think that the Bengali widows from Chapter 1 are an example of this sort of case. If these women were to stand up for themselves—by, say, vocally demanding their fair share of the limited resources available to them—they could be perceived as uppity and could face retribution from people keen to remind them of their place. They could risk beatings, expulsion from their community, even murder. Their actions could subject their children to these risks. If risks like these are attached to resisting externally, one has very good reason to not resist externally. But even if these women would be risking harm by resisting oppression externally, they could still tell themselves that they deserve the food they’re giving up as much as anyone else does and that their survival is as important as anyone else’s.

In some cases, there might be nothing an oppressed person can do to resist her oppression other than simply recognizing that something is wrong with her situation. This is, in a profound sense, better than nothing. It means that she hasn’t acquiesced to the innumerable forces that are conspiring to convince her that she is the sort of person who has no right to expect better. It means that she recognizes that her lot in life is neither justified nor inevitable. There’s something importantly self-respecting about engaging in internal resistance, and the possibility of this sort of resistance captures the intuition that there are
things someone can do to fulfill the duty of resisting oppression even when external resistance is imprudent or impossible.

Admittedly, in many cases it might be difficult to tell whether someone is resisting her oppression internally. In Chapter 1, for example, one of the cases we looked at dealt with the question of whether Native Companion responded appropriately to the men who sexually harassed her. Someone might plausibly interpret this as a case of internal resistance to oppression: they might argue that by refusing to let the carnies get to her—by refusing to feel humiliated, by refusing to let them dictate to her when and how she can have fun, and by refusing to believe that their sexually objectifying her demeans her moral status as a person in any way—Native Companion is protecting her rational capacities from the harms of oppression and so is, in effect, resisting her oppression internally. This is a plausible interpretation of what’s gone on in this situation, I think. Native Companion is portrayed in this story as someone who is feisty, confident, and self-secure; there’s every reason to think she’s the sort of person whose rational capacities aren’t endangered by an isolated incident of sexual harassment.

But an alternative interpretation of what’s gone on here that’s just as plausible, I think, is that Native Companion is exhibiting either bad faith or ignorance resulting from internalized oppression. She might be unaware of how the systematic nature of oppression means that its harms are likelier to occur corrosively than discretely and thus that the full extent of its harms are never appreciable when looking only at isolated incidents. She might resist characterizing herself as oppressed because she doesn’t want to think of herself as a victim or the men her life as victimizers. She might be unwilling to give up the benefits
afforded to her by the oppressive status quo.\textsuperscript{33} She might have simply accepted the sexist status quo—a status quo where men are free to objectify and harass women and face relatively few consequences—as not merely inevitable but actually not unjust. Native Companion’s hypothetical ignorance or bad faith here might be blameless.\textsuperscript{34} But she would be mistaken, nevertheless. If this interpretation of the situation is the right one, then Native Companion isn’t resisting her oppression internally by refusing to let the carnies get under her skin. Rather, she’s exhibiting exactly the bad faith or ignorance that we should expect of someone in her circumstances.

The point here is that the very nature of oppression can make it difficult or impossible to tell whether someone is resisting internally or is acquiescing. So, if the only resistance someone is putting up is internal, we might have no way to know whether she’s fulfilling the obligation to resist her oppression. There will be a fact of the matter here, but we might not have access to it.\textsuperscript{35} Notice that this possibility holds not just when attempting to determine whether someone else is resisting her oppression; it also holds when attempting to determine whether we ourselves are resisting. You might think that you’re resisting your oppression internally—or, if, like Native Companion, you’re not inclined to think about things in terms of oppression, you might think you’re being self-respecting or some such

\textsuperscript{33} As we saw above, in Chapters 2 and 3, the concern that oppressive social systems can be perpetuated because they afford oppressed people some (usually inauthentic) benefits has been raised by Simone de Beauvoir.

\textsuperscript{34} Anita Superson, for example, has argued that expecting women to recognize the full extent of their oppression is to expect them to be “visionary.” This is an unreasonable and unfair expectation, Superson argues, because sexism can infect virtually every aspect of their lives in a patriarchal society. See Anita Superson, “Right-Wing Women: Causes, Choices, and Blaming the Victim,” \textit{Journal of Social Philosophy} 24 (1993): 40-61, and “Deformed Desires and Informed Desire Tests,” \textit{Hypatia} 20 (2005): 109-126.

\textsuperscript{35} To be clear: this is an epistemic point about whether we can know that internal resistance has taken place, not a metaphysical point about whether internal resistance has in fact taken place.
thing—but you could be fooling yourself. You could be engaging in *self-deception:* one of the most common forms of practical irrationality encouraged by oppression. One of oppression’s most common harms to our rational capacities—encouraging certain kinds of self-deception—will thus make it difficult to know whether we’re fulfilling the obligation to resist oppression if we only resist internally. This gives us good reason to err on the side of caution, to not necessarily trust our gut when we think we’re resisting internally, and to resist oppression externally whenever possible, to be sure we’re successfully fulfilling this obligation.

Furthermore, internal resistance might be able to protect one’s rational nature from the harms of oppression, but it would leave oppressive social structures intact. I agree with Cudd on this matter: there are good reasons to think that someone who is oppressed has obligations to other members of her oppressed group to not acquiesce in oppressive social structures, even if these structures are not harming her personally. This means that internal resistance, even if successful in protecting one’s own rational nature, would usually be insufficient to fulfill every moral obligation of resistance an oppressed person has.

On top of all this, I think it’s psychologically implausible to suggest that successfully protecting one’s rational nature solely by means of engaging in internal resistance is a live possibility for most oppressed people. Most people’s psychologies simply aren’t oppression-proof. This is why the harms of oppression are so extensive. So, again, while the obligation to respect one’s rational nature in the face of oppressive harms could theoretically be satisfied solely by resisting oppression internally rather than externally, some degree of external resistance to oppression will almost always remain necessary.

Insofar as these different forms of resistance—internal and external—function to destabilize or undermine oppressive social structures, they all count as resisting one’s
oppression. They are thus sufficient to fulfill the obligation to resist one’s own oppression. (By calling these actions ‘sufficient’ I don’t mean to imply that someone merely has to perform one of them and then she’ll have successfully fulfilled her obligation to resist her oppression and can go on her merry way and never have to bother resisting ever again. Rather, I mean that they count as one sort of action which, when performed in conjunction with other actions of this sort, successfully fulfill this obligation.) But are any of these forms of resistance necessary? Does the obligation to resist one’s oppression require any of these actions? I contend that, while each of these actions counts as resisting one’s oppression, none of these particular actions is required by the obligation to resist. And this is just to say that, insofar as the obligation to resist one’s oppression is an imperfect duty, it permits latitude in which actions one may undertake to fulfill it.

Consider another example. One of the most straightforward ways to resist one’s own oppression is to directly confront one’s oppressors. Think back, for example, to the question of whether Native Companion has an obligation to confront the carnies who sexually harassed her. I contend that Native Companion’s obligation to resist her oppression means that there is at least a prima facie obligation for her to confront her harassers. But, as we’ll see below, the objection from risk shows that this obligation must be defeasible in the face of considerations such as the need to assure that she isn’t putting herself in an unreasonable amount of jeopardy by confronting these men. That Native Companion’s obligation to directly confront her oppressors is defeasible in this way means that direct confrontation is not necessary to fulfill the obligation to resist her oppression.

There are other reasons to think the direct confrontation of one’s oppressors is not necessary to fulfill the obligation to resist one’s oppression as well. Remember that oppression is a social phenomenon that doesn’t require individual agents as oppressors. A
situation can therefore be oppressive without there being any individual oppressor to point to. So the obligation to resist one’s oppression can’t require someone to confront individual oppressors, because in many cases there are no individual oppressors to actually confront. The obligation here must be to resist one’s oppression and hence need not be to confront any one individual oppressor. We can see how the latitude in which action to take that is permitted by the imperfect duty model is useful here. Because the duty to resist one’s oppression is an imperfect duty to set the general end of resisting one’s oppression, direct confrontation of one’s oppressors is an example of an action that is a permissible but not necessary means of fulfilling this obligation.

LATITUDE IN REFRAINING FROM ACTION

All imperfect duties have the kind of latitude just discussed: because they are specified quite generally, there will always be more than one action someone can undertake to fulfill an imperfect duty. But some imperfect duties also have a different kind of latitude: it’s sometimes permissible to refrain from acting to fulfill some imperfect duties, as long as one doesn’t refrain all the time. The paradigm cases of imperfect duty found in Kant—giving to charity, developing one’s talents—have this kind of latitude. But Kant thinks some imperfect duties—respecting others, increasing one’s moral perfection—don’t have this latitude. The question is, then, does the imperfect duty to resist one’s oppression have this kind of latitude? Is it permissible to sometimes sit by and let oneself be oppressed? Is this duty in this respect like the Kantian duties to give to charity or to improve oneself: the sort of thing one needn’t devote one’s life to but that one has to act to fulfill at least some of the time? If that’s the case then many acts of resistance will be supererogatory, and it’s possible that very few will actually be required.
To see why a Kantian might think the imperfect duty to resist one’s oppression should permit latitude in refraining from action, think again about the analogy to the erosive effects of water dripping on stone that we considered in Chapter 3. There, I claimed that just as individual droplets of water that seem not to have any effect on a piece of stone can cumulatively wear the stone away, rational nature can be harmed in almost invisible increments. So too for oppression: what might seem to be merely the harmless slights or annoyances or inconveniences of oppression can have a cumulative effect on people’s rational nature. This means, I claimed, that there’s a case for extending the obligation to resist one’s oppression to cover even those instances of oppression that seem not to directly harm one’s rational nature—because the systematicity of oppression makes these harms as likely to occur corrosively as discretely.

But thinking about the harms of oppression in this way also provides a useful way of approaching the question of whether this obligation permits latitude in refraining from action. Must the oppressed resist their oppression at every available opportunity? Just how strict is the obligation to resist one’s oppression? If the erosion analogy can be taken seriously here, then it looks like a case can be made for arguing that people aren’t obligated to resist every instance of their oppression. If you have a piece of stone that has to be protected only from detectable erosion, then you obviously can’t let water run over it for any period of time, but any individual drop splashing on it here and there will probably not be a problem so long as you’re careful to not let it happen for too long or too often. So too for the corrosive effects of oppression on one’s rational nature—many individual instances of oppression can be borne without discernibly harming one’s rational nature, but eventually they will accumulate and discernible harm will occur. This means that the obligation to protect one’s rational nature from being harmed by oppression could allow one to refrain
from resisting at least once in a while. Because rational nature is so valuable, one needs to err on the side of caution, obviously, and be careful to not let the corrosive effects of oppression accumulate. But it’s compatible with an obligation to protect one’s rational nature to occasionally fail to resist individual instances of oppression that would end up harming one’s rational nature were one to fail to resist them all the time.

This result suggests that the obligation to resist one’s oppression should permit at least some latitude in refraining from action. Remember, imperfect duties are duties to adopt a general principle of action, not duties to perform a particular action; this generality means that one can fulfill some imperfect duties without necessarily acting on them in every possible instance. And it looks like the obligation to resist one’s oppression should allow this sort of latitude—someone can protect her rational nature, and thus fulfill the obligation to protect it, without resisting her oppression in every instance, so long as she doesn’t do this so often that the corrosive effects of oppression are allowed to accumulate. This means, for example, that someone like Native Companion from Chapter 1 could, on occasion, be morally permitted to not do everything in her power to resist her oppression at every available opportunity. She could be morally permitted to do nothing in this instance: she could not bother confronting the carnies, and even not bother reporting the incident to their boss. If the erosion analogy is apt, it turns out that “climbing on and spinning and ignoring assholes and saying Fuck ’em,”36 might be okay, at least once in a while. Maybe sometimes it’s true that this is “pretty much all you can do with assholes.”37 The erosion analogy


suggests that Native Companion’s imperfect duty to resist her oppression should permit her at least some latitude in refraining from action.

To be clear, what this duty does not permit her to do is resist so rarely that the harms of oppression accumulate and damage her rational nature. Because rational nature is so fundamentally valuable, the duty to protect it by resisting one’s oppression will have less of this sort of latitude than imperfect duties like the duty of beneficence and the duty to develop one’s talents. But unlike, say, the imperfect duty to increase one’s moral perfection, which Kant says permits no latitude in refraining from action, the imperfect duty to resist one’s oppression could permit some of this latitude in action. And, to be clear, this latitude is possible because the obligation here is not merely to respect one’s rational nature, but to protect it.

But just how much of this kind of latitude does the obligation to resist oppression permit? Do we really want to say that people are sometimes morally permitted to do literally nothing to protect their rational capacities from the harms of oppression? I’m not so sure. What motivates the attractiveness of this kind of latitude most strongly here, I think, is the recognition that there are situations in which resisting one’s oppression in the wrong way can be dangerous (or at least counterproductive). We considered the possibility of these sorts of situations—subjecting oneself to retributive harm or to feelings of exhaustion or victimization—at the beginning of this chapter, and we’ll return to look at them again in a moment. The thought that’s motivating the attractiveness of latitude in refraining from action here is that because certain actions taken to protect rational capacities can be dangerous or counterproductive if they’re taken all the time or in the wrong circumstances, refraining from acting to protect one’s rational capacities might actually be the best way to protect them in certain circumstances. Fair enough.
But, I claim, despite surface appearances, it would be a mistake to categorize the latitude in question here as latitude in refraining from action. This is because the explanation for why someone isn’t required to act (or is permitted to not act) in these sorts of circumstances is that successfully fulfilling the duty to protect one’s rational capacities requires (or permits) that one not act in these circumstances. One’s failure to act here is thus actually better described as a failure to act outwardly or externally. One is still acting, in the relevant sense. One has still set the maxim to protect one’s rational capacities, and one’s behaviour is still in accord with this maxim. It’s just that in these circumstances the best way to achieve this end is to refrain from doing anything outward. One recognizes this, and acts accordingly. One is, in short, resisting one’s oppression internally. It’s latitude in which action to take to fulfill the duty to protect rational capacities—the other kind of latitude—that explains why one is required (or permitted) to fulfill this duty by refraining from acting externally in these circumstances. Were this to be a case of latitude in refraining from action, one would set the maxim to protect her rational capacities, recognize that the best way to achieve this end in these circumstances would be to take a certain course of action, but then refrain from taking this course of action. And that’s not what one has done here.

The erosion analogy shows that it’s compatible with an obligation to protect one’s rational nature to occasionally fail to resist individual instances of oppression that would end up harming one’s rational nature were one to fail to resist them all the time. I don’t mean to undermine that conclusion; I think there’s something to it. But I also think the erosion analogy really gets us a relatively limited amount of latitude in refraining from action: because rational nature is so fundamentally valuable one needs to err on the side of caution and be careful to not let the corrosive effects of oppression accumulate. This discussion emphasizes just how little latitude in refraining from action I think this duty should permit.
Because the most compelling cases of where the objections we’re concerned with seem to require latitude in refraining from action are actually addressed by the possibility of internal resistance, even if this duty does permit some of this latitude I claim there’s not much reason to want it to permit much of it. I think we’re better off endorsing an account of the duty to resist oppression that permits a lot of latitude in which actions fulfill it, but relatively little latitude in refraining from acting to fulfill it.

Perhaps this discussion should lead us to say that because internal resistance is always a possibility the duty to resist oppression permits no latitude in refraining from action. But should we say that the duty to resist oppression always requires at least internal resistance? Or is refraining from resisting internally sometimes permissible as well? I’m open to the possibility that there could be cases where someone shouldn’t have to do anything to resist her oppression, not even resist internally. The erosion analogy establishes this as a possibility: it demonstrates how many individual instances of oppression can be borne without discernibly harming one’s rational nature. But, given that we can account for the most intuitive cases of when it seems that resistance shouldn’t be required with the possibility of engaging in internal resistance, I think the burden of proof is on the person who wants to claim that not even internal resistance is required in a given circumstance. There might be such a case. But I can’t think of what it would be. Notice that any argument attempting to claim that not even internal resistance is required in a given circumstance is, in effect, going to be an argument for why someone doesn’t have to be self-respecting in this circumstance. This will not be an easy argument to make. Saying, “I just don’t feel like it,” or, “It’s just not that big a deal,” is nowhere near sufficient to establish that one should not have to be self-respecting.
Take the case of Native Companion: if her expressed desire to do nothing to resist her oppression at the hands of the carnies is actually a form of internal resistance—perhaps because she recognizes on some level that being required to mount external resistance to every situation like this would be exhausting or victimizing—then she’s in the clear. She’s fulfilling the duty to protect her rational nature by reserving her energy for more important matters. She’s respecting herself by resisting her oppression internally. But if Native Companion wants to do nothing here simply because she’s too lazy, or because she’s suffering from bad faith or ignorance due to internalized oppression, then she hasn’t fulfilled the obligation to resist her oppression. If these are her reasons for refraining from action in this oppressive situation, she’s likely to make a similar judgement about the permissibility of refraining from action in other oppressive situations. Taking claims such as, “I just don’t feel like it,” or, “It’s just not that big a deal,” to be good reasons to refrain from action is evidence that one doesn’t properly appreciate the gravity of the situation: it’s evidence that one doesn’t properly appreciate the value of her rational nature or doesn’t properly appreciate the risks her rational nature faces under oppression. And failing to appreciate this will inevitably lead to harms to one’s rational capacities.

So, if the imperfect duty to resist one’s oppression permits latitude in refraining from action, it doesn’t look like it permits much of it. Still, because there are many different ways to protect our rational capacities in oppressive contexts, and thus many different actions that count as fulfilling the duty to protect them, this duty permits a great deal of latitude in which action to take.
BACK TO THE FOUR OBJECTIONS

The question now, then, is how this latitude in action supplied by the imperfect duty model will allow us to respond to the objections I began this chapter with. Each of these objections, remember, was motivated by the concern that a duty to resist one’s own oppression would be, in some way, too demanding.

1. The Objection from Risk

The objection from risk, remember, is the objection that there cannot be a general obligation to resist oppression because resisting oppression can sometimes endanger the victim. Because taking action to protect one’s rational capacities can sometimes be dangerous or counterproductive, refraining from acting to protect one’s rational capacities is sometimes the best way to protect them. Resisting oppression can endanger one’s rational capacities either because resisting can result in feelings of exhaustion or victimization or because resisting can bring about retribution from others. And because one cannot be obligated to face such risks, one cannot be obligated to resist oppression.

But remember, both these possible causes of harm had to do with this obligation’s apparent requirement to resist oppression in every instance, whenever one is able. We can see now that these causes of harm also have to do with this obligation’s apparent requirement to resist oppression in a specific way. Being obligated to resist every instance of oppression is what leads to the possibility of exhaustion or victimization. Being obligated to resist certain instances of oppression with an overt challenge to that oppression is what leads to the possibility of retribution. And being obligated to resist oppression in a specific way is what leads to the possibility of all these causes of harm. The imperfect duty model shows...
that none of these possibilities need be a result of the obligation to resist oppression.

Because the imperfect duty model tells us that people are not obligated to resist every instance of oppression, people are not obligated to resist to the point of victimization or exhaustion, nor are they obligated to resist if doing so would lead to retribution. And because the imperfect duty model tells us that there are many ways to resist oppression, one can resist oppression but avoid the harms of retribution, victimization, or exhaustion by resisting internally.

The objection from risk, really, tells us that the duty to resist oppression needs to be able to accommodate certain kinds of latitude in action—certainly latitude in which action to take and possibly latitude in refraining from action. As we’ve just seen, characterizing the duty to resist oppression as an imperfect duty gives us this latitude.

2. The Objection from Blaming the Victim

The objection from blaming the victim, remember, is the objection that the obligation to resist oppression is unfair because the victim hasn’t done anything wrong. It would be strange, and seriously morally problematic, were the existence of an obligation to resist oppression to mean that oppressive harms impose moral obligations onto these harms’ victims instead of their perpetrators. Because they haven’t done anything wrong, it seems unfair to demand that oppressed people take on the burden of trying to rectify their situations. So there cannot be an obligation to resist oppression, the thought goes, because the unfairness of this obligation is sufficient to vitiate it.

Morally objectionable practices of victim-blaming can range, we saw, from simply blaming people who are innocent of wrong-doing, to shifting the moral accountability away from the perpetrator of a harm, claiming that some failing on the victim’s part contributed to
the harm, pretending that a victim has the power safely to prevent the harm, pressuring a victim into problematic relationships with others, or pressuring her to do something that will diminish her self-respect. If an obligation to resist oppression necessarily results in any of these morally objectionable practices, I concede that this would be reason to reject the existence of such an obligation. But none of these practices are a necessary consequence of the existence of this obligation, I contend.

Now, it’s true that people who fail to resist their oppression are guilty of failing to fulfill an obligation they have to themselves. But because this is so, there’s a legitimate sense in which they are guilty of wrong-doing. This means that in blaming them for this wrong-doing we are not blaming them of something of which they are innocent. It’s not their fault that they are oppressed, but it usually is their fault if they fail to resist this oppression.

To respond to the concern that blaming the victims of oppression for failing to resist implies that some failing on their part contributed to the harm, we need to emphasize that it’s not the fault of oppressed people that they are oppressed. Having an obligation to resist oppression when you are oppressed through no fault of your own is, I contend, a matter of having bad moral luck.38 It’s not oppressed people’s fault that they are stuck with this obligation, but they’re stuck with it nevertheless. And while they are not responsible for

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38 Thanks to Joan Callahan for suggesting the connection to moral luck here. There is a massive literature on the possibility of moral luck—the possibility that the moral worth of an agent’s actions (or even the moral worth of her character) could hinge on factors that are beyond her control. The problem raised by this literature is that the common practice of evaluating an agent or an agent’s actions partly on the basis of circumstances beyond her control seems to be indicative of an inconsistency (at best), or an incoherence (at worst) in how we think about moral issues. The general consensus, I take it, is that the possibility of moral luck is insufficient to undermine our basic moral concepts. See, e.g., Harry Frankfurt, “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility,” Journal of Philosophy 66 (1969): 829-839; Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck,” Mortal Questions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 24-38; Bernard Williams, “Moral Luck,” Moral Luck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 20-39.
being oppressed, unless they have no freedom whatsoever, they are still usually responsible for what they do under oppression. This means that they are responsible for resisting their oppression.

What, then, about the concern that holding people responsible for resisting their oppression wrongly pretends that these people have the power safely to do something about their oppression? As we'll see in more detail in a moment, when we look at the objection from ought implies can, in cases where it’s actually impossible for people who are oppressed safely to resist their oppression, they are not obligated to resist. But, we’ll see, this is not the case for as many instances of oppression as one might think.

To respond to the concern that this obligation would shift the focus from those guilty of perpetrating the harms of oppression to those who are the victims of these harms, we need to emphasize that the obligation to resist oppression is not an obligation that applies solely to oppressed people. I’ll admit that it’s important to not focus solely on the obligations the oppressed have at the expense of focusing on the obligations those who benefit from oppression have.39 Make no mistake: anyone who does not resist oppression is guilty of neglecting a moral obligation to fight injustice. This obligation is made all the more pressing by the realization that people who benefit from oppression have power that puts them in a better position than the oppressed to be able to dismantle oppression. And society in general has an obligation to divest itself of its unjust institutions. People who are oppressed are certainly not the only ones who have an obligation to resist oppression. But people who are oppressed do have this obligation, and it’s an obligation they have not merely to other oppressed people, but to themselves.

And, finally, I think there is clearly no real concern that an obligation to resist oppression would pressure people into problematic relationships with others, or that it would pressure people to do things that would diminish their self-respect. This obligation would, if anything, pressure people to leave problematic relationships with other people. And, as we’ve seen, this obligation is fundamentally an obligation to preserve one’s self-respect.

The obligation to resist oppression thus need not result in any morally objectionable practices of blaming the victim. Now, I’ll admit that the obligation to resist oppression does exist thanks to unfair social conditions. But this unfairness, by itself, is insufficient to vitiate the obligation. It’s important to not be an apologist for oppression: we need to be very careful to avoid excusing or justifying the ways oppressed people can be harmed. This means, I think, that the concern to avoid blaming the victims of oppression is ultimately beside the point. Even if the obligation to resist one’s own oppression is unfair, this is just one more reason that oppression should be eradicated. If it turns out that one of the ways that oppression harms the oppressed is that it burdens them with unfair obligations, then this is just one more reason to eliminate it. I think that there’s good reason to believe that many of the obligations oppressed people have to resist their oppression are unfair. But unfair obligations are obligations nonetheless.

3. The Objection from Ought Implies Can

The objection from ought implies can, remember, is the objection that the obligation to resist oppression cannot accommodate certain logistical considerations. Given how prevalent oppressive social situations are, it’s simply impossible to resist oppression by attempting to neutralize or dismantle every oppressive social institution. Sometimes resisting oppression is
impossible because being able to resist requires solidarity from others and without this cooperation nothing one does can count as resistance. Resisting oppression can also be impossible when oppression has already severely damaged one’s rational capacities to the point where acts of resistance are not merely difficult but are actually impossible. And, a proponent of this objection claims, if one cannot resist her oppression then it can’t be that she ought to resist it.

In response to the claim that it’s impossible for any one person to single-handedly dismantle oppression, let me point out that the obligation to resist oppression, as I’ve characterized it, isn’t an obligation to dismantle oppression. Rather, the obligation here is to protect one’s rational capacities from the harms of oppression. And while it might not be logistically possible for one person to fix every oppressive institution, it is possible for her to at least attempt to protect her rational capacities from the harms of these institutions.

But what about cases where an oppressed person isn’t able successfully to protect her rational capacities from the harms of oppression? Does the obligation to resist oppression persist after someone’s rational capacities have been harmed to the point where she is not able to resist? I concede that if severely oppressed people, such as, say, the Bengali women from Chapter 1, have had their rational capacities harmed to the point where they are actually incapable of resisting their oppression, then it can’t be that they have an obligation to resist. But one thing to notice here is that the case of the Bengali women comes from a larger body of work in which Martha Nussbaum shows how many oppressed people do resist their oppression, despite the tremendous odds. Much of Nussbaum’s work focuses on highlighting the ways even that severely oppressed people can band together successfully to resist their oppression. Take, for example, her discussion of a Bangladeshi woman named Saleha Begum:
In 1975, near Dhaka, Bangladesh, Saleha Begum’s husband became physically disabled and they lost their land. Despite local community norms against women working outside the home, Saleha decided to go to work. At first, ashamed to be seen, she worked in the fields at night, by moonlight. As she got used to working, both her fear and local criticism of her actions abated. She organized a team of female laborers to demand employment at government-sponsored food-for-work sites, where laborers moved large amounts of earth each day. Local officials refused their request, saying, “Women in Bangladesh should not work outside their homes.” Saleha continued her fight.\\n
Eventually, Saleha and the other women she joined with won the right to work. They also won access to educational programs and loans. Nussbaum concludes, in response to cases like this one, that oppressed people can “overcome the greatest of obstacles, showing an amazing courage and resourcefulness.”\\n
Because they can resist, even many people who are severely oppressed are obligated to resist. Of course, I concede that resistance is not always possible in severe cases of oppression. I agree that if someone is so oppressed that she is literally incapable of resisting then she cannot be obligated to resist. But this is a virtue of my account, for it fits with the intuition both that we should hold people responsible for fulfilling their obligations when they are able to fulfill them, and that we should not hold them responsible when they are unable.\\n
The objection from ‘ought implies can’ is further undermined in light of a discussion from Marcia Baron. People often misinterpret Kant’s point of the ‘ought implies can’ doctrine, Baron claims. According to her, ‘ought implies can’ does not mean that morality ought not require too much of us; instead, it means that anything that morality requires of us

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40 Nussbam, Sex and Social Justice, 3.

41 Nussbam, Sex and Social Justice, 18.

42 Thanks to Sigrún Svavarsdóttir for pointing this out to me.
is something we are able actually to do. This fits well with a familiar theme in Kant’s ethics: that we are often far too quick to find excuses for making exceptions of ourselves from the requirements of morality.

Kant’s famous principle is often cited as support for a claim that we must not regard too much as our duty, but his point was not the contraposition of the dictum—that if we cannot do x, we have no duty to do x—but rather that if we ought to do it, we can do it. “When the moral law commands that we ought now to be better men, it follows inevitably that we must be able to be better men” (R 50-51/46). He was calling not for a shrinking of duty but for a recognition that we are much more capable than we suppose, and that usually we are not honest with ourselves if we say ‘I just couldn’t help it’ or ‘It’s too much for me.’ Far from endorsing the assumption that acts that are very difficult for us should be regarded as optional, Kant’s principle emphasizes that difficult does not mean impossible.43

Another reason Baron warns against thinking of acts that are difficult for us to perform as acts that are impossible for us to perform is that doing so threatens to undermine our freedom.44 If we pretend as if our particular inclinations—our “fears, desires, and aversions”—make it utterly impossible for us to perform certain acts, then we are acting as if we are not free. And this, clearly, is something Kant would be loath to accept. And, in fact, this is exactly the sort of damage to practical rationality that I’ve been focusing on. Baron refers here to something Kant says about a person whose Sovereign threatens to kill him unless he makes “a false deposition against an honorable man whom the ruler wished to destroy under a plausible pretext: ‘that it would be possible for him [to refuse] he would certainly admit without hesitation. He judges, therefore, that he can do something because he knows that he ought, and he recognizes that he is free—a fact which, without the moral law, would have remained unknown to him’ (PrR 30).” Knowing that we ought to do

43 Baron, 44-45.

44 Baron, 45.
something can be what tells us that we are able to do it, Kant thinks. We should not pretend, then, that acts that are difficult for us are actually impossible for us. This further undermines the objection that acts that are sufficiently difficult for us cannot be required by duty. ‘Ought implies can,’ again, means not that morality ought not be too demanding, but that it ought not be too lenient.

So, then, as long as it’s been established that an individual is actually capable of resisting her oppression, the mere fact that this resistance will be difficult for her is, by itself, insufficient to excuse her from the obligation.

4. The Objection from Supererogation

The objection from supererogation, remember, is the objection that because there are reasons to think that there cannot be a general obligation to resist oppression, we should characterize resisting oppression as supererogatory rather than obligatory. This objection is most clearly articulated by Cudd, who denies that resistance to oppression is always obligatory. Instead, she argues that one has an obligation to resist oppression only when failing to do so harms other members of one’s oppressed group. And even for the cases where both Cudd and I agree that people have an obligation to resist oppression, Cudd’s account of why people have this obligation differs from mine. Cudd characterizes the duty to resist oppression as a duty one has to prevent harms to others, not a duty one has to prevent harms to oneself. In cases where acquiescing in one’s oppression harms only oneself, resistance is supererogatory rather than obligatory.

But Cudd is ultimately unclear about just how many cases of resisting oppression will be supererogatory and how many will be morally required. At one point she says explicitly,
“In my view, … a duty to resist may be uncommon though not inconceivable.”³⁵ But immediately after this she says, “Yet, I do not think it is so uncommon,” and goes on to suggest some “nearly costless way[s] of resisting” that are open to members of oppressed groups such as refraining from enforcing oppressive norms on members of one’s oppressed group.³⁶ This seems to suggest that she thinks the distinction between supererogatory and obligatory instances of resisting oppression hinges not just on whether others will be affected by failing to resist, but also on the cost to the individual of resisting. I’m not sure what the justification for this move is supposed to be; perhaps the thought is that if the cost to the individual of resisting is greater than (or possibly comparable to) the cost to others of failing to resist then resistance cannot be morally required, even if failing to resist harms others. That is, perhaps the thought is that resisting oppression cannot be too costly or difficult for the resister.

But this doesn’t tell us, with any kind of precision, which cases of resistance will be obligatory and which will be supererogatory on Cudd’s account. The calculations involved here will inevitably be imprecise. Because the systematicity of oppression means that its harms are often not immediately apparent, it will be no easy task to determine just how much others are harmed when one participates in an oppressive social norm or institution, or just how much oneself is harmed when one resists oppression by refusing to participate in such a norm or institution. How are we really to decide if the harm one undergoes by opting out of an oppressive social norm or institution that offers the prospect of certain material benefits is greater than the harms others undergo when one participates in and thus

³⁵ Cudd, 200.

³⁶ Cudd, 200.
legitimates such a norm or institution? I think that in many cases there will be no way to know. This ambiguity presents a serious problem for Cudd’s account. The distinction between which acts are supererogatory and which are obligatory is no small matter, since it is one we need as practical agents when making our moral decisions.

And, in any case, even if Cudd is willing to say that most cases of resisting oppression affect other people and are thus obligatory rather than supererogatory, there will inevitably be cases of resisting oppression that affect only the individual and will thus be supererogatory on her account but obligatory on my account. The problem here, really, is Cudd’s assumption that the relative difficulty of resisting oppression should have any affect whatsoever on its obligatoriness. This assumption is what gives us from Cudd’s account a version of the objection that the duty to resist oppression cannot be too demanding. And as we saw above, a reply to this objection is that just as it’s important that morality isn’t too demanding, it’s important that morality isn’t too lenient.

Baron, remember, argues that it’s just as important to avoid making morality too lenient as it is to avoid making morality too demanding. Baron actually rejects the concept of supererogation in general. The concept is unnecessary for a Kantian, she argues, because Kant’s account of imperfect duties can capture successfully everything that is worthwhile from the concept of the supererogatory. I find Baron’s arguments against the concept of the supererogatory in general quite persuasive, but I won’t defend them here. Instead, I suggest we remain agnostic here about whether the concept of supererogation in general should be discarded, but help ourselves to Baron’s arguments against this particular version of supererogationism—the version that claims that morally praiseworthy but difficult or heroic acts are always supererogatory rather than obligatory—to undermine Cudd’s assumption that resistance to oppression must not be too difficult for those resisting. Cudd’s argument for
why resisting one’s own oppression is supererogatory rather than obligatory, I claim, is largely motivated by the thought that this resistance ought not be too difficult for the resister. But Baron’s arguments show that the difficulty of performing an action, by itself, is insufficient to transform its status from an obligation into a supererogation. And so, because we’ve addressed Cudd’s explicit, practically-oriented reasons for claiming that resisting oppression cannot be obligatory in other sections, we can safely reject her view here.

CONCLUSION

The concern we’ve been looking at in chapter is that an obligation to resist oppression would be, in some way, too demanding. We looked at four arguments for this claim—the objection from *risk*, the objection from *blaming the victim*, the objection from *ought implies can*, and the objection from *supererogation*—and saw that each of these potential objections can be answered if we think of the obligation to resist oppression as an imperfect duty. What’s particularly useful about the imperfect duty model is that it shows how this obligation is able to permit different kinds of latitude in action. Because someone who is oppressed isn’t obligated to do whatever it takes to neutralize or dismantle the systems that oppress her, and because she isn’t necessarily obligated to resist every time she is oppressed, we can defend an obligation to resist oppression without worrying that such an obligation would be too onerous.

So where does this leave us? My goal here, remember, was to show that oppressed people have an obligation to resist their oppression. I set out to do this by first showing how the systemic harms of oppression can damage people’s rational natures, and by showing
how this often happens in nearly invisible increments. Then I defended the Kantian tenet that says that the fundamental moral importance of our rational nature means we have an obligation to protect it from harm. And so, I’ve argued, under oppressive social circumstances the obligation to protect our rational nature translates into an obligation to resist oppression.
APPENDIX
THE DIVISION OF DOMESTIC LABOUR AS A CASE STUDY OF OPPRESSION

Consider the sexual division of labour in our society, which assigns the responsibility for
domestic work primarily to women.¹ Women are assumed to be responsible not only for
most of the work involved in raising children but also for the majority of the most time-
consuming work involved in running a household—cooking and preparing meals,
housecleaning, grocery shopping, washing dishes and cleaning up after meals, and taking care
of laundry.² Women tend to feel obligated to perform these household tasks, while men
tend to assume that this domestic work is primarily women’s responsibility. When men do
participate in housework, this participation is seen as optional: even couples who share much
more housework than is average characterize men’s domestic contributions as “helping”

¹ For a pop exposition of many issues surrounding the sexual division of domestic labour, see Rhona

For a comprehensive review of articles and books on the division of household labour, see Scott
Coltrane, “Research on Household Labor: Modeling and Measuring the Social Embeddedness of

Finally, for a highly influential feminist analysis of the unfairness of the sexual division of labour,
see Susan Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: BasicBooks, 1989). Okin argues that the
institutions of marriage and the family, as currently practiced, are unjust. She contends that marriage
places women in a position of vulnerability that is out of proportion with any vulnerability that it
imposes on men and that this vulnerability is socially caused: first by the (personal and socially
reinforced) expectation that women will be the primary caretakers of children, then by the need to
find and keep a husband to provide economic support for this endeavour, then by the unfair
distribution of labour within a marriage, and then finally, if the marriage breaks down, by the unfair
distribution of household resources in divorce settlements.

² S.L. Blair and D. T. Lichter, “Measuring the Division of Household Labor: Gender Segregation of
their partners. Men’s contributions to housework tend to be noticed and negotiated, while women’s contributions tend to be taken for granted.

This work isn’t fun, and there’s evidence to suggest that it isn’t all that good for you either. Most men and women report that they don’t like housework, and research indicates that performing a lot of routine, repetitive housework is associated with higher rates of depression. The domestic work that does tend to be men’s responsibility—tasks such as household repairs, yard care, or paying bills—are all tasks that are generally less repetitive, more time-flexible, and reported to be more enjoyable than the routine, everyday tasks that women are responsible for. Much of men’s domestic work is discretionary in a way that much of women’s domestic work just isn’t: fixing a leaky faucet is something that can be put off indefinitely; calming a screaming infant or feeding a hungry family are things that demand constant, immediate attention.

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Domestic work is also regarded as so unimportant that it is rendered virtually invisible in the economic sphere. Simply put, it just doesn't get counted as real work. Despite playing a crucial role in the economy of every family, domestic work has until very recently received little to no recognition by economists. Because work gets defined as paid employment—as market-oriented wage labour—the only time the work done in households get counted is if someone outside the family is getting paid to do it.

And yet, despite the drudgery and the disvalue of it all, women live up to their domestic responsibilities with a vengeance: the average woman does about two or three times the amount of routine housework as the average man. Lest one be tempted to think this disparity can be chalked up to stay-at-home moms who are skewing the numbers, it’s worth noticing that women who are employed still do about two thirds as much housework as women who are not employed and are significantly more likely than men to adjust their work schedules to accommodate other family members. Given all of this, it should come as no surprise that married women who are employed have been shown to experience more

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10 J. Robinson and G. Godbey, ibid.

stress and enjoy less leisure than their male partners. But here’s the kicker: even though women perform between two thirds and three quarters of the total household labour, only about one third of women rate their division of domestic labour as unfair, and virtually all men report being satisfied with the fairness of their division of domestic labour. That so many people rate this situation as fair suggests that unequal divisions of domestic labour are accepted as normal. But why is this so? Why should what looks to be a clearly unjust situation be acceptable to so many people? Why do women agree to this division of labour, when it clearly seems not to be in their best interest to do so?

According to the account of oppression I articulated and defended in Chapter 2, this division of domestic labour is an instance of oppression. This account makes sense of why this social arrangement counts as oppressive even though it seems to be freely chosen by everyone involved and even though it’s perhaps less extreme than the sorts of cases of oppression, like Fascism or apartheid, that might immediately come to many readers’ minds. Remember, the harms that are of particular interest to me, given my aim of grounding an obligation to resist oppression, are the harms to people’s rational nature. And the case of the sexual division of domestic labour illustrates nicely both (a) how the harms of oppression are systemic and structural and (b) the subtle ways that oppression can harm people’s

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rational nature. As we’ll see, this case demonstrates how oppression can cause women to engage in a variety of irrational actions, ranging from deceiving oneself into forming practically relevant false beliefs about one’s moral obligations, to akratically performing actions one has resolved not to, to counterproductively enforcing sexist social norms.

One thing to notice is that the expectation that one will conform to traditional gender roles is foisted upon young women very early in their formative years. Because it starts so very early, women tend to structure their vision of the future around this expectation. Call this, the assumption that much of women’s adult lives will be dedicated to the domestic work of raising children and maintaining a household, the assumption of domestic responsibility. Because women overwhelmingly internalize this assumption\(^{15}\)—because they come to expect these things of themselves—they contribute to their oppression in several different ways. First, in some socioeconomic classes, this internalized assumption can affect the sort of education women get: some of the girls who grow up with the assumption of domestic responsibility tend not to bother getting the kind of education that leads to high-paying and prestigious jobs, while some of the boys who grow up with the correlated assumption that much of their adult lives will be dedicated primarily to supporting their families do tend to get this kind of education. The internalized assumption of domestic responsibility goes on to affect the career opportunities that are open to many women: even those young women who have managed to escape these (sometimes self-imposed) educational disadvantages tend not to choose high-paying and prestigious careers at the same rate as similarly educated men, because these careers tend to involve inflexible or

unpredictable hours that are incompatible with the domestic responsibilities (particularly the raising of children) that they assume they will have. This, we saw in Chapter 1, was what was going on in the case of the Ultimate Bride. The assumption of domestic responsibility is thus a textbook example of how social norms, once internalized, can negatively affect the life prospects of the oppressed.

But, in at least one sense, the assumption of domestic responsibility is an entirely reasonable assumption for women to make. After all, women actually are, in fact, held responsible for this work in a way that men aren’t. And women actually do, in fact, end up performing more of this work: moving into marriage and childrearing ends up increasing women’s household labour significantly more than it does men’s. Things are set up in such a way that it is both very hard for women not to do much of this work and simultaneously not all that easy for men to do much of it. There is a huge amount of social pressure for women and men to conform to gendered social roles. This social pressure means that there are reasons to perform housework that go beyond the fact that much of this work really is necessary and unavoidable. That is, there are incentives for women and men to perform both the kind and the amount of housework that are considered to be socially appropriate

16 Of course, not being in the running for prestigious and high-paying jobs is a problem that is generally faced only by women who are already quite privileged. The problem faced by many of the women who are most disadvantaged by oppression is not that they tend not to get prestigious and high-paying jobs to support their families; the problem is that they tend not to get jobs that can support a family at all. Many women’s biggest problem isn’t that they can’t compete with white male professionals; it’s that they’re stuck in an unending cycle of poverty, violence, and dead-end jobs. Clearly, the sexual division of labour doesn’t just prevent a handful of women from succeeding in the highest echelons of society: women earn less than men across all economic classes.

for members of their gender. Doing certain household tasks, and not doing others, gives women and men the opportunity to affirm to themselves and to others that they are competent members of their respective genders. In our sexist society, part of what it means to be a good woman involves taking the right kind of care of one’s home and family (and having a husband who can support the whole endeavour financially), and part of what it means to be a good man involves being the primary breadwinner for one’s family (and having a wife who will take good care of all of one’s things). So the sexual division of domestic labour lets women and men prove to themselves and to others that they are, in a sense, normal. Gender norms thus provide both women and men with disincentives to challenge, and incentives to assent to, an unequal distribution of domestic labour. Given this, it should come as no surprise that there is evidence to suggest that the gendered division of domestic labour results not just because many men are reluctant to do this work but also because many women are reluctant to let them.

We’ve already seen how the assumption of domestic responsibility can lead women to make life choices that entrench the sexual division of labour, by encouraging them to choose some educational and professional tracks over others. But the social pressures behind the assumption of women’s domestic responsibility affect men as well. For example,

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although many companies offer parental leave benefits to both women and men, the vast majority of those who use these benefits are women. Men who refrain from using these benefits tend to report doing so for two reasons. First, because men tend to earn more than their wives, many claim it makes more economic sense for women to leave their paid work than it does for men. Second, many men report fearing stigmatization at work were they to take time off to care for their children. Again, publicly shared assumptions about what social roles are appropriate for each gender affect both men and women.

The workplace reflects the assumption of women’s domestic responsibility in other ways as well. For example, virtually all high-paying jobs operate under the tacit expectation that employees are not primarily responsible for domestic work (particularly childrearing). High-paying, professional careers require long, inflexible hours and are stubbornly resistant to part-time or job-sharing options. All of this is a reflection of the now-outdated assumption that workers are not also responsible for the nonnegotiable commitments that are an inevitable part of childrearing. In the past, the workplace could avoid making many accommodations for workers with children because it was assumed that men had wives at home to take care of such matters. Things have changed—between two thirds and three quarters of married women remain in the workforce after having children—but what remains unchanged is the unspoken assumption that men work because they are the primary income-earners for their families, while women who work tend to do so merely to supplement their family’s income. The assumption of domestic responsibility is why women


rely far more frequently on part-time work than do men:23 this work fits more happily with the domestic responsibilities with which women are disproportionately saddled.

Even women who are able to escape being responsible for much of this domestic work—either by choosing not to have children, or by finding partners actually willing to share this work equitably, or by being able to afford to hire someone else to do much of it for them—can find themselves harmed by the assumption of domestic responsibility. This is because employers make assumptions about individuals based on their gender: women who do want professional careers will have a harder time getting them (and getting promoted in them) because their employers will tend to assume that as women they will eventually want to quit or scale back their work. Stereotypical assumptions made about women in general might not be true about particular women, but those women will still pay the price.

All this goes some way toward explaining why women tend to acquiesce in the assumption of domestic responsibility and take on an unequal share of domestic work: they do this work because there is a widely held social expectation that they are the ones who should be responsible for it, because they have internalized this expectation and so structure their lives accordingly, and because someone has to do this work and the institutions of society are set up so it’s simultaneously hard for men to do it and even harder for women not to. But none of this explains why so many women perceive unequal distributions of domestic labour to be fair. Why do women agree to this division of labour without complaint, when it seems plainly not in their interest to do so?

I contend that so many women accept this situation as fair because they have internalized the assumption of domestic responsibility. One effect of women's internalization of the assumption of domestic responsibility is that their self-conceptions can come to be affected: they can come to see it as both inevitable and as natural that they should be responsible for this work. They affirm this as their natural role. When women adjust the education they get when they are young and the career choices they make later in life to accommodate responsibilities that seem both natural and inevitable, these adjustments will often not even be experienced as restrictive. And, even if women do experience the responsibilities that are tied to their domestic social role as restrictions, presumptions that this social role is natural or inevitable will tend to stave off the perception that these restrictions are all that bad. After all, if a restriction is completely intractable, there’s not much point in getting terribly exercised about it: it would make about as much sense as feeling persecuted by gravity. In this way, the assumption that domestic responsibilities are naturally or inevitably the province of women can explain why unequal divisions of domestic labour are often perceived of as fair. But this division of labour is not fair: these women are mistaken in their beliefs about what is fair.

These mistaken perceptions of fairness are, I contend, evidence that women’s oppression has harmed their rational nature in a particular way. Mistakenly believing that unfair restrictions or demands that are placed upon them are really fair is a sign that women have been given false beliefs about what is fair. They have, that is, been given false beliefs about their moral obligations. And since moral obligations are inherently practical, their ability to guide their actions rationally is impaired. Convincing yourself that an unfair situation is fair, and then acting accordingly, is thus a form of practical irrationality.
This phenomenon, I contend, usually involves some kind of self-deception: women deceive themselves about the fairness of unequal distributions of domestic labour. Self-deceptive behaviour, remember, is a kind of practical irrationality that can very commonly result from oppression. And as we just saw, one reason women deceive themselves here is because they have internalized the assumption of domestic responsibility. Another explanation for why some women form these mistaken perceptions of fairness has to do with the relative cost of exiting a relationship. Women who have less education than their husbands, and women who perceive the costs of leaving their marriage to be high, have been shown to be more likely to perceive their division of domestic labour as fair. That higher exit costs are associated with higher perceptions of fairness suggests that at least some women have a vested interest in perceiving their situations to be fairer than they really are. These mistaken perceptions of fairness are evidence that these women’s abilities to set certain ends—such as leaving the relationship, or doing something that would require leaving it—have been impaired, because an appreciation of the risks associated with rocking the boat gives such women reason to deceive themselves into thinking they have no grounds for complaint. This, then, is another way that these women’s oppressive social circumstances can lead them to engage in practically irrational self-deception.


25 Another possibility here is that these explanations that appeal to oppressive considerations to explain why so many women consider their family’s unequal division of domestic labour to be fair are misguided, because it’s actually not the case that this unequal distribution is unfair. One might claim, for instance, that these women don’t take themselves to be getting the short end of the stick in domestic matters simply because they properly appreciate the dangerous, physically demanding, or relatively highly skilled nature of the domestic labour that is traditionally the province of men. Men are expected to lift heavy things, to climb on ladders, to use power tools, to perform household repairs, and all of these sorts of chores either carry physical risks or require a certain amount of skill, which is apparently not the case for much of the domestic work that women are responsible for. So, the thought goes, it’s fair for women to perform a disproportionate quantity of the domestic labour in their households because of the quality of the labour they perform: women’s work is simply not as
There are other forms of practical irrationality that can arise in the context of
domestic labour as well. One has to do with certain form of akrasia. It’s not uncommon for
women to resolve not to perform household chores that their male partners have accepted
responsibility for, only to turn around and akratically do (or redo) these chores themselves.
This akrasia is, in many cases, almost certainly attributable to sexism, because men don’t
seem subject to it in the same way. Why might women akratically perform chores that
they’ve resolved not to? One explanation has to do with the fact that, as we’ve seen,
internalizing the assumption of domestic responsibility can make women feel as if they are

risk, difficult, or physically demanding as men’s work. Alternatively, one might claim that these
women consider their unequal share of domestic labour to be fair because they are making up for the
fact that their husbands work more hours outside the home than they do or earn more money than
they do. Thus, most men’s contribution to the household is primarily financial, while most women
make up for their unwillingness or inability to carry their weight financially by performing a greater
amount of the household’s domestic labour. (Thanks to Don Hubin and George Schumm for
pressing me on these, and related, points.)

I don’t find either of these lines of response to be ultimately persuasive. For one, I’m not at all
convinced that the quality of what is traditionally considered to be men’s domestic work makes it, on
the whole, more dangerous or more highly skilled than what is traditionally considered to be
women’s domestic work. Cooking, for example, requires more skill than most minor household
repairs, and it can be just as physically dangerous. (Surely using a frying pan can be just as dangerous
as using a cordless drill.) And the psychological risks (such as depression) that are associated with
what is traditionally considered to be women’s domestic labour are surely no less dangerous than
most of the physical risks that are associated with what is traditionally considered to be men’s
domestic labour. But, even if we could figure out how on earth to balance these psychological risks
against these physical risks, or how to calculate how many “unskilled” household tasks one must
perform in order to make up for the “skilled” tasks that one does not or cannot perform, the fact
remains that in the traditional distribution of domestic roles virtually no negotiation over who does
which tasks actually occurs. If men sincerely believe that the traditional distribution of domestic
labour is fair and that the domestic tasks that they are traditionally responsible for really are just as
arduous or unpleasant as the tasks that women are traditionally responsible for, then they should be
willing to trade these tasks with women; but this, of course, does not occur in the traditional
distribution of domestic labour. Nor can the perceived fairness of the unequal distribution of
domestic labour be accounted for by women who are atoning for not working outside of the home,
because, as we’ve seen, women who work full-time outside the home still perform more housework
than do their husbands. It is the case, however, that in most households women who are employed
full-time don’t make as much money as their husbands do. But this phenomenon itself is something
that cannot be explained without appealing to sexist oppression; so, if this is the explanation for why
so many women perceive their unequal distribution of domestic labour to be a distribution that is
fair, it is not an explanation that avoids reference to sexist oppression.
primarily responsible for domestic labour being done according to certain standards. This can make it difficult for them to lower their standards and accept the quality of domestic work their partners perform. Women will also recognise that they will be the ones that others—visitors to their home, for example, who have also internalized the sexist belief that housekeeping is the province of women—will judge poorly if the housekeeping isn’t up to snuff. Rather than face these negative judgements from themselves or others, women can weaken in their resolve to hold their partners responsible for the chores they’ve agreed to do and simply do the chores themselves.

Another explanation for why women can akratically perform domestic work they’ve resolved not to has to do with a particularly pernicious double bind many of them face. In general, it’s been shown that couples who have similar attitudes about the appropriate division of housework—couples who agree that couples should share housework equally, or that men should do more housework, or that women should do more housework—are happier in their marriages. But, because men still do much less housework than women, a pattern emerges here along gendered lines: women who believe in sharing housework will tend to be less satisfied in their marriages, while men who believe in sharing housework will tend to be more satisfied in their marriages. And, because housework is generally perceived


to be optional for men in a way that it isn’t for women, women are typically the ones stuck having to pick the fights necessary to change or enforce the distribution of housework in a relationship. Unsurprisingly, then, it’s also been shown that when men believe more strongly than their wives that housework should be shared equally there will tend to be fewer disagreements in a marriage, but when wives believe more strongly than their husbands that housework should be shared equally (as is far more often the case) there will tend to be more disagreements in a marriage.\textsuperscript{29} Many women thus find themselves facing a double bind where there is nothing they can do to make the situation right: they can pressure their husbands for a more equal distribution of housework and risk threatening their relationship, or they can weaken their resolve to not perform the chores their partners had accepted responsibility for and do (or redo) the work themselves.

Another form of irrational action in the context of domestic labour can result from the gatekeeping behaviours we examined above. Unequal divisions of domestic labour result, we saw, not just because many men are reluctant to do this work but also because many women are reluctant to let them. This gatekeeping can take the form of a certain kind of irrational training of men and boys in housework: when a man who expresses willingness to do household chores but initially does them quite poorly, this can make a woman decide that, instead of patiently training him how to do the task properly or accepting a less than perfect result, she’d rather do it herself. But this is an irrational way of approaching the problem, since it’s generally unreasonable to expect someone to perform a new task perfectly the first or second time. Even women who can show patience in other kinds of teaching (teachers, for instance) can seem quickly ready to give up on teaching men how to do

\textsuperscript{29} D. N. Lye and T. J. Biblarz, \textit{ibid}.
laundry or scrub toilets and just do it themselves. Since the men profess to be willing and the women don’t like the work, this gatekeeping behaviour is irrational.

This gatekeeping can also take the form of certain kinds of sexist teasing: women who want their men to play more of a role in housework can sometimes irrationally tease their male partners for taking on housework. “You’d look cute in one of my aprons, darling,” they might say. Such statements are, it seems clear, expressions of women having internalized sexist norms that derogate anything associated with femininity. But this sort of teasing is certainly self-defeating, and thus irrational, when (as is often the case) the woman would like the man to continue to do some housework.

These, then, are merely a few of the ways that practically irrationality can be brought about in the context of domestic labour. These irrational actions, we saw, range from deceiving oneself into forming practically relevant false beliefs about one’s moral obligations, to akratically performing actions one has resolved not to, to counterproductively enforcing sexist social norms. Remember, the structural and systemic nature of oppression means that oppressive harms generally function in concert with one another, so the harms of oppression might not even be recognizable as harms if they are viewed individually. But, collectively, these harms can function to impair the rational natures of those who are oppressed. And engaging in practically irrational behaviours is evidence that this has occurred.


David Foster Wallace, “Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All,” *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997).


