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Do the Oppressed Have a Duty to Self-Emancipate? Thoughts on Overcoming Oppression

Abstract: This article considers whether self-respect is a duty the oppressed must uphold. On the one hand, it seems that to affirm such a duty could burden the oppressed with too demanding a task. It can lead us to forms of victim-blaming. On the other hand, to claim that the oppressed do not have a duty to self-respect because they already have 'too much on their plate' risks being condescending, as if they were passive sufferers with little capacity to resist. Bascara (2020) argues that the oppressed do have a self-regarding duty to strive for emancipation. To argue otherwise is 'to rob them of their agency'. In this paper, I examine the self-regarding duty to resist as a duty to self-respect and highlight some of the salient issues it presents (section 1). I focus on the problem of whether failures to uphold this duty are blameworthy (section 2). I then argue that thinking of self-emancipation in terms of a self-regarding duty is not the only, or the best way to respect the agency of the oppressed (section 3). In the final section, I sketch out how a Spinozian perspective can help us think of self-emancipation, not as a duty, but as an active endeavour, nonetheless (section 4).

Introduction

The question of whether the oppressed have a duty to fight against their oppression confronts us with the following conundrum: if oppression fundamentally disrespects the dignity of the oppressed, to deny that the oppressed have a duty to resist oppression risks depriving them of their agency. In this sense, denying the duty to self-emancipate risks being condescending, treating the oppressed like passive sufferers with little capacity to fight back. On the other hand, the claim that the oppressed have a duty to resist risks being too demanding: if the oppressed fail to resist, is this a culpable moral failure? And if so, would this position not lead to forms of victim-blaming? Bascara (2020) argues in favour of a duty to self-emancipate as the only way to recognise the agency of oppressed subjects. I would like to contribute to her thoughts on this difficult issue by challenging this claim and exploring a different path, one that respects people's agency but does not ascribe them a duty to resist.

I will proceed in the following way. I will first examine some of the ways in which the duty to self-emancipate has been understood in terms of a duty of self-respect (section 1). My purpose is not to give an exhaustive account of this debate, but to highlight some of the salient issues (section 2) in order to show

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that thinking of self-emancipation in terms of a self-regarding duty is not the best way to respect the agency of the oppressed (section 3). I then suggest a Spinozian path for thinking of self-emancipation, not as a duty, but as an active endeavour, nonetheless (section 4).

1. Self-emancipation as self-respect

Bascara argues that there is a duty to fight against oppression, and that this duty falls upon both oppressed and oppressors. However, in our non-ideal world, she argues, the oppressed are particularly concerned with this duty because it is unrealistic to rely on the goodwill of the oppressors. This entails exercising a capacity for self-determination and articulating demands to bring about justice. Bascara's defence of a duty to self-emancipate is grounded in two main arguments. The first argument (A) is that, given that oppressors are not compelled to dismantle oppression – because this goes against their own interests – in many cases they will fail to fulfil the duty to overcome oppression. Others, then, would have to fulfil this duty. But if we think the oppressed do not have a duty to resist, this will force us to conclude that nobody has a duty to rectify the injustice. This is a view Bascara deems incoherent (Bascara, 2020: 227). Her second argument (B) is that to deny that the oppressed have a duty to self-emancipate is to rob them of their moral agency. Arguing that the oppressed have a duty to self-emancipate implies recognising their capacity to self-determine and to have a say in the terms of their emancipation. In other words, it allows us to recognise that, although disempowered, the oppressed retain enough power to resist (Bascara, 2020: 227).

I see argument (B) as more compelling than (A). If oppressors are unmotivated to fulfil the relevant duty, this does not mean that such duty ceases to exist (*contra* A). In other words, the duty of the oppressed is not dependent upon matters of fact, namely, the likelihood that oppressors will not (in most cases) fulfil their duty. There is no reason to argue that the oppressed have a duty to self-emancipate in order to claim that injustices must be corrected.[1] I remain to be convinced by Bascara's (2020: 227) claim that 'if there is nothing anyone can do, then it is not an injustice and therefore not a case of oppression' (Bascara 2020: 227).

1 An additional distinction can be drawn between oppressors as those who directly contribute to oppression, and enablers, who only contribute to oppression indirectly. This may also complicate Bascara's argument according to which the duty to resist falls exclusively on the oppressed given that oppressors are in most cases unwilling to dismantle oppression. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this relevant distinction.

In contrast, argument B presents two main strengths. First, it offers a more humane view of the oppressed: the oppressed are not reducible to their powerlessness. Secondly, it does not depend on the factual consideration of whether the oppressors will have enough goodwill to fulfil their duty. In fact, even if oppressors do correct some injustices (perhaps by being forced to pay reparations, for example), the duty to self-emancipate remains.

Bascara thinks of this duty in a twofold way: the duty to promote justice (shared by oppressors and oppressed) and the duty to oneself, a 'self-regarding duty' to fight for emancipation, which falls exclusively on the oppressed. In relation to resistance against oppression, philosophers have often understood the self-regarding duty to resist as a *duty of self-respect* (Boxill, 1976). Although Bascara's argument does not develop what a self-regarding duty to resist might consist of, her account can accommodate what we might frame as the duty of justice and the self-regarding duty of self-respect.[2] Tommie Shelby (2007: 153) outlines these duties as such:

> The duty of self-respect, which is fulfilled by recognizing and affirming one's equal moral worth as a person, also provides a reason to protest or resist injustice. But it differs from the duty of justice. One expresses self-respect by, for example, standing up for oneself when one has been treated unjustly, rather than meekly acquiescing. The duty of self-respect is a matter of defending one's dignity in the face of injustice; the duty of justice is a matter of taking proactive steps to end injustice or to make the relevant institutions more just. The duty of self-respect is a self-regarding duty; the duty of justice is one owed to others. The duty of self-respect demands action from those who have been wronged; the duty of justice demands action regardless of whether one has been wronged.

The idea that the oppressed have such duties has sometimes been challenged out of concerns that this position leads to 'victim blaming' (Shelby, 2007: 154). However, Bascara argues in favour of such a duty, much like Shelby, because in their view this is the only way we recognise the moral and political agency of

2 Duties of justice and of self-respect are, according to Shelby, natural moral duties, distinct from civic obligations: 'Civic obligations are owed to those whom one is cooperating with to maintain a fair basic structure. They are the obligations that exist between citizens of a democratic polity as defined by the principles of justice that underpin their association. Civic obligations have binding normative force because of the contingent associational ties between citizens, that is, because of the formal or informal bonds that define a set of persons as a distinct people or nation. By contrast, natural duties are unconditionally binding, in that they hold between all persons regardless of whether they are fellow citizens or are bound by other institutional ties. Both civic obligations and natural duties are moral requirements. The key difference is that one has civic obligations qua citizen and natural duties qua moral person' (Shelby, 2007).

those being oppressed.[3]

If self-respect has been identified as a central element of resistance against oppression in feminist and critical race theories, it is because self-respect is something that the oppressed are particularly at risk of lacking or losing (Dillon, 1992b; Meyers, 1986: 94-96). Lacking self-respect can look like 'Deep and enduring shame and self-contempt, unremitting doubts about one's worth, a tendency to see oneself as not quite as good or not quite as valuable as others.' (Dillon, 1992: 52). If this is so, then resisting oppression means resisting the erosions of self-respect by striving for a greater self-respect.

How can the oppressed strive for more self-respect? What are the conditions allowing for the development of this form of resistance? If oppression systematically undermines our self-respect, then the question of the conditions for increasing self-respect is a puzzling one. Does not striving for self-respect presuppose already a basic sense of self-respect without which any resistance would be impossible? On some accounts, autonomy has been identified as a condition for self-respect (Meyers, 1986; Ferguson, 1987; Dillon, 1992b); we need to live autonomously because we respect ourselves better in that way: 'autonomous envisaging and fulfilment of life plans is a necessary condition for self-respect' (Meyers, 1986: 83).

More recently, Beate Roessler inverts this relation: it is self-respect that appears as a necessary condition for autonomy: 'It is not possible to act autonomously without a certain sense of self-respect or self-worth. (…) Self-respect is therefore a precondition of autonomy' (Roessler, 2021: 23). The duty to resist oppression can be understood as a duty to strive for autonomy. Roessler argues that self-respect is a pre-condition to autonomy, understanding autonomy as our capacity for self-determination, and self-respect as synonymous with self-worth, self-esteem and self-confidence (*ibid.* Roessler, : 205 n30). Self-respect is 'constitutive of the possibility of autonomy' (*ibid.* : 74), because of its essential connection with another crucial link of the chain, namely, self-knowledge. Self-knowledge (knowing what one thinks, believes and wants) is essential to autonomy because in order to be capable of self-determination (i.e. to decide according to my

3 In some cases, however, the duty to promote justice and the duty of self-respect might plausibly clash. Demanding the oppressed to uphold the duty of justice may sometimes put them in sacrificial situations, undermining of self-respect: 'Of course, it would be unreasonable to expect individuals to work to bring about a just society when doing so would be very dangerous or costly. (…) After all, many have more than they can handle just trying to meet their basic needs and maintain their dignity.' (Shelby, 2007: 153–154) In such cases, Shelby's (2007: 154) position seems to be that self-respect should have precedence over the duty of justice; the latter is a duty 'provided (…) they can maintain their self-respect and meet their other basic needs'.

own judgement, beliefs and desires), I first need to know what I think, believe and want. But in its turn, self-knowledge presupposes self-respect as its basic precondition, in the sense of a basic confidence in myself as an epistemic agent, as capable of 'knowing that p'. Self-knowledge presupposes seeing oneself as someone who is 'capable and entitled, who has the freedom –to deliberate and decide that p' (*ibid*.: 76). If, for example, I am systematically insecure about the fact that I *can* know that P (maybe an alien force has put these thoughts in me, so that I cannot ascertain what belongs to me and what belongs to an external entity), then I will not be able to confidently deliberate and make decisions on the basis of my thoughts being things that belong to me. Therefore, Roessler argues, 'No *autonomy* without *self-knowledge* and no possibility of self-knowledge without self-respect; this is the fundamental connection' (*ibid*.:74). In this way, to treat myself disrespectfully is to fundamentally distrust myself in my 'capacity as a knower' (Fricker, 2007).

Making self-respect a condition for resistance and emancipation seems to present a chicken-egg situation: to resist, I need to respect myself, but I cannot respect myself if I do not resist. To deal with this conundrum and break this apparent circularity, we need a more fine-grained conception of self-respect.[4] This will allow us to get more clarity about what it means to cultivate self-respect and will give us more elements to answer the question of whether self-respect should be thought as a duty that the oppressed must uphold.

1.1 Degrees and kinds of self-respect

We can start by distinguishing different *degrees* of self-respect. We can posit that resistance requires a *minimal* form of self-respect that, except perhaps in very violent situations, cannot be totally undermined. Despite being oppressed and having our self-respect harmed, we can always use that minimal self-respect as a trampoline to develop richer, more empowering forms of self-respect. Unless we posit this minimal capacity to respect ourselves, it will be very difficult to understand how we may be able to resist the very forces that undermine our capacity for self-respect.[5] A minimal self-respect could consist of a basic interest in one's wellbeing.

4 Of course, framing the arguments in such linear terms might not be the only or the best way to think the relationship between autonomy and self-respect. In fact, Roessler's way of framing it suggests a circularity: 'Self-respect is therefore a precondition of autonomy –and developing self-respect in turn depends on forms of life that at least in principle recognize the autonomy of persons' (Roessler, 2021: 23). I will return to this point later, but for the sake of the argument, let's see what the *Self-respect-to-autonomy* argument entails.

5 Some therapeutic interventions that seek to build back self-trust consist in drawing attention to the multiple ways in which we *do* trust ourselves to make small, daily decisions: we choose to eat cereal instead of porridge, lemonade instead of orange juice, etc. The idea then is to bring awareness to these small decisions in order to acknowledge that a degree of self-trust is in fact always present.

However, it could be objected that an interest in my wellbeing is not incompatible with attitudes that consist in 'meekly acquiescing' (Shelby, 2007), which could be seen as manifestations of poor self-respect. I could strategically engage in opportunistic sycophancy to realise my life-plan or cowardly choose not to voice my protest against oppression. In this sense, if we agree that servile attitudes, even if strategic, are inimical to self-respect as resistance, a distinction of degrees of self-respect does not give us enough elements to understand what kind of self-respect we need in order to be able to resist. After all, if self-respect involves, as Roessler argues, self-trust, could an arrogant person or someone who never distrusts themselves be said to have more self-respect than someone who systematically doubts herself?

Robin Dillon's (1992a) distinction between *Recognition self-respect* and *Evaluative self-respect* is useful here. Recognition self-respect (R-Self-respect) consists of regarding oneself as a person entitled to certain consideration in virtue of this status. It presupposes objective criteria. I might think some things worthy of my status as a person, while others unworthy (e.g. servility, or self-destructive behaviour) (Stark, 1998). It involves

> (1) recognizing that something is a person, (2) appreciating that persons as such have intrinsic moral worth and status, (3) understanding that the fact that something is a person constrains us morally to act only in certain ways in connection with him or her, and (4) acting and being disposed to act in those ways out of that recognition, appreciation, and understanding (Dillon, 1992: 54).

Evaluative self-respect (E-Self-respect), on the other hand, concerns the assessment of one's behaviour or personality traits (e.g. valuing one's intellectual and physical capacities, such as one's talent for dance, or maths), based on subjective criteria. In this sense, someone may have a fair amount of R-Self-respect but lack E-Self-respect in other aspects. For example, I may think that servility goes against my R-Self-respect but still suffer from 'imposter syndrome' (low E-Self-respect). Conversely, I could have an unwarrantedly high opinion of an aspect of myself (high E-Self-respect) – for example, by thinking that I sing very well when I do not have a musical ear – but lack in R-Self-respect by engaging in attitudes that are deemed unworthy of my status as a person (e.g. opportunistic sycophancy).

Based on these distinctions, we can now ask: what is the kind of self-respect that is necessary for resisting oppression and fighting for emancipation (autonomy)? At face value, R self-respect seems fundamental, if we agree that oppression disrespects my intrinsic status as a person (my dignity), while

relatively low or high levels of E-self-respect do not necessarily threaten my dignity. The self-respecting person, Dillon argues, 'is not servile, does not acquiesce willingly in the avoidable denial of her rights, and resists demeaning or humiliating treatment.' (Dillon, 1992b: 55). However, an extremely low E self-respect could threaten my R self-respect; a total lack of E self-respect could lead to a lack of R self-respect. For example, if I think of myself as unintelligent I will by the same token lose my R self-respect as a person, if we think, as Roessler argues, that an essential part of being a self-respecting person is to have the capacity to minimally trust oneself in one's capacity as a knower.

It therefore seems that a minimal degree of E self-respect (at least the one that concerns my intellectual capacity) is necessary to resist oppression. In consequence, along with R self-respect, there must be a minimal degree of E-self-respect that is not destroyed by oppression, and that allows us to fight back. On the other hand, a very low E self-respect could be the consequence of a lack of R self-respect. However, although oppression can almost completely undermine R self-respect, we need not think this is the case in most cases of oppression. We can presuppose that, although oppression entails a systematic disrespect, most oppressed persons still maintain enough R-self-respect without which it would be difficult to understand why one would be motivated to resist oppression, which is often articulated as a demand for more respect.[6]

2. Assessing failures of self-respect.

Now that we have more clarity about what differences of degree and kind self-respect can present, we can ask what it entails to see it *as a duty*: if self-respect is a duty, how should we judge failures of self-respect? Are they blameworthy?

Certainly, defending a collective or individual duty need not be tied to culpability and blame. Iris Marion Young's (1990; 2011) 'social-connection model' for addressing structural injustice defends a notion of responsibility that, unlike blame, is not backward-looking but forward-looking; it is less concerned with assigning culpability and more with rectification and reparation. Blaming individuals for their failure to be self-respectful is therefore not the only way we can think duties can be upheld. In her discussion, Bascara finds Young's view insufficient when it comes to thinking about the responsibility of *oppressors,*

6 My argument is more concerned here with the self-respect we have as individuals. But I am not arguing that building self-respect or maintaining it is a task that depends on the individual alone. Rather, as Honneth (1996) argues, we develop self-respect only by being recognised as worthy of respect by others (see also Code, 1987). In the context of oppression, this recognition is partly undermined. But it is never totally absent: for example, recognition exists between oppressed subjects even if they are denied recognition on a juridical basis. However, for the purposes of this discussion I focus on whether, as individuals, there are some ways in which we do not lose some kind of self-respect, even if our social environments deprive us of the recognition we need.

as it lets them too easily 'off the hook'. On the one hand, in claiming that there can be structural oppression without individual culpability, Young's account of responsibility for oppression is incoherent in Bascara's view, as it 'fails to fully appreciate that social structures are dependent on individuals, and failures to partake in her forward-looking conception of responsibility for oppression are culpable failures of individual action' (Bascara, 2020: 194). For Bascara, while it is true that many individuals are not culpable for causing the harms of structural oppression, they can nevertheless be blameworthy if, once they *know* about these harms, they do not take any action towards dismantling structural oppression. On the other hand, Young's rejection of the language of blame and culpability is unconvincing, according to Bascara, because blaming oppressors for their actions can be actually useful as a motivating factor: 'When we hold each other and ourselves to blame for failing to remedy injustice, we are laying the groundwork for how we can move other agents and ourselves to action.' (Bascara 2020: 200). Unlike Young, Bascara's account of responsibility for oppression integrates both the backward-looking view and the forward-looking one:

> If the agents required to correct [an injustice] are unwilling, they deserve an assessment of culpability. But the responsibility to alleviate or improve unjust conditions does not disappear when we charge those who are responsible but unwilling with culpability [backward-looking]. Instead, responsibility shifts to others [forward-looking]. Take the case of an abandoned child. If the child's parents are simply unwilling to fulfil their responsibility, they are deserving of blame because they are failing to comply with their duty to their child. But we do not stop at blaming the parents. We think, for instance, that other relatives of the child need to take responsibility for the child. If there are no such relatives, we look to the rest of society, like the State, or social services. (Bascara 2020: 225).

Nevertheless, Bascara recognises that some failures of self-respect are patently non-blameworthy. It would be wrong to blame victims of 'gaslighting' in domestic violence for such failures. They are not blameworthy because they do not have sufficient power to trust and respect themselves. To blame them would be equivalent to denying or minimizing the degree of violence that effectively disempowers them. Indeed, it is debatable whether we should consider these to be 'failures' at all. This is an argument that Bascara contemplates as well: 'Individuals can be excused from this responsibility when the cost is too high, they are therefore not blameworthy' (Bascara, 2020: 229).

However, there are other cases where our failure to respect ourselves seems

attributable to morally culpable patterns of thought and behaviour that hinder our capacity for autonomy. While Bascara argues that in very special cases some individuals are exempt from the duty to self-emancipate, she is committed to the stronger general claim that if oppressed individuals fail to fulfil their duty to self-emancipate, they are blameworthy.

In feminist literature, failures of disrespect have been discussed in terms of a tendency to be complicit in one's own oppression. This complicity has been explained in terms of adaptive preferences, which are impositions that shape women's oppressive desires and 'turn [them] away from goods and even needs that, absent those conditions, they would want' (Cudd, 2006: 181, as cited in Knowles, 2021: 1318). But while some of the *adaptive preferences* explanations may account for many cases of complicity,[7] they do not provide a satisfactory one for all cases of self-subordination, particularly in those where the oppressed are privileged enough to avoid self-subordination. In many cases, despite being subject to oppressive structures, some people maintain enough power to be able to act in ways that are more self-respectful. The problem is, therefore, why do they fail to do so? For Simone de Beauvoir, some forms of complicity are in 'bad faith' (Knowles, 2021; Melo Lopes, 2024), which is a form of dishonesty in which we delude ourselves about our freedom or lack thereof. Unlike the cases examined in the adaptive preferences literature, some women's self-subordination shows not simply passive acquiescence, but more *active* forms of complicity that seem to belie a form of *stubbornness* (Knowles, 2021). Similarly, epistemic vices such as laziness, arrogance and close-mindedness (Medina, 2013), can hinder our capacity to respect ourselves.

If it is within our power to trust ourselves – and therefore to respect ourselves as epistemic agents – then failing to do so leads us to fall short of virtue. These failures to show self-respect in the form of complicity echo the kind of moral failing that Kant famously identified in our tendency to relinquish our capacity to think for ourselves (autonomy) and let our decisions and lives be ruled by external forces (heteronomy). Kant attributed this tendency to a self-inflicted immaturity caused by cowardice and laziness: 'Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution

7 For example, Serene Khader's explanation of adaptive preference as trade-off due to deprivation allows us to understand why, as her example discusses, a woman may choose to eat less "'because of conditions where keeping her male relatives happy is the best way to ensure access to income, safety and so on.'" (Khader, 2012: 310 as cited in Knowles, 2021: 1320). In this sense, adaptive preference literature seems to account mainly for non-blameworthy cases of self-subordination.

and courage to use it without the guidance of another. (…) *Sapere aude*! [Dare to be wise!]' (Kant, 2009: 7).

Whether due to cowardice, laziness or stubbornness, these failures could be said to be *blameworthy* if, as these accounts suggest, it is *within our power* to be more courageous and open-minded, rather than lazy and stubborn. This seems to be Bascara's intuition as well, when she assesses the failure to fulfil the duty to self-emancipate as a moral failure. For Bascara, blame is warranted in cases where the oppressed are unwilling to exercise their power to resist.[8] She writes, 'it seems that those among the oppressed who are unwilling to fulfil their duty to self-emancipate, should be blamed' (Bascara, 2020: 229). This is where the victim-blaming objection can be addressed: to argue that the oppressed have a duty of self-respect only applies in cases whereby the oppressed still have it within their power to strive for self-respect. If they fail to do so, they can be condemned, and this is not simply blaming the victim because the oppressed are not *only* victims. Blame only touches that sphere of freedom that the oppressed are stubbornly, lazily or cowardly *unwilling* to exercise.

2.1 A familiar case

To better understand this, let's consider the following case as a common form of failure to self-respect to which many (heterosexual) women are prone to. The difficulty to respect ourselves often manifests in a kind of gap between what we know and what we do; as a sort of cognitive dissonance between, on the one hand, our understanding of oppression and, on the other hand, our behaviour or feelings. For example, a feminist might find herself in this predicament: 'I *know* I should not meekly acquiesce when a man mansplains, but… I find myself doing it more often than not'. This is a kind of self-alienation that Rahel Jaeggi exemplifies through the case of H., the 'giggling feminist':

> H., a self-professed, reflective feminist of strong convictions, catches herself repeatedly communicating with her lover like a silly, giggling adolescent girl. She rejects such forms of feminine coquetry as unemancipated, as the mannerisms of a 'little girl.' She has long understood that the idea that women must present themselves as cute, petite, and harmless to be attractive is the projection of a world dominated by men. Yet, as she discovers to her irritation, she constantly falls back into these patterns of behavior against her will (Jaeggi 2014: 100).

Let's expand the picture of Jaeggi's 'giggling feminist', 'H'. Although having

8 However, the manner in which 'that responsibility distributes or devolves to the individual agents that make up the collective, turns on specific individual considerations' (Bascara 2020: 229).

sufficient knowledge about the nature of sexism, misogyny and the way it affects women, H. finds herself falling in love with emotionally unavailable men who leave her feeling profoundly disrespected, used and unappreciated. Not only does she *know* that encounters with these men are bad for her, but she also seems to systematically ignore all the 'red flags' that pop up when she meets them. She sees what is best, she approves of it, and yet… she ends up choosing what is worse. Case in point: going out again with A., a man who she wants to be loved by, but who only uses her for sex. A., who does not want a serious relationship, contacts her. She is very attracted to him, but she knows that he cannot give her what she wants. She decides to go out with him and promises herself that she will not fall for him again; that she will just enjoy the moment. They have a good time, and she feels proud of herself for not expecting anything else. A few days after the date, she sends him a message. He does not reply; she is left on 'Seen'. Then, she realises with disappointment, it is happening again: he got what he wanted (sex), she became disposable. And she was hoping after all for a deeper connection. 'How could I be so stupid?' she asks herself, 'When am I going to learn?'.

Is H. showing a form of laziness, cowardice or stubbornness by going out with A. despite knowing best? Is she failing to show self-respect because she is, in a sense, unwilling to do so? H. blames herself because she systematically ends up in situations that harm her self-respect. She is too smart to be so stupid. She should have known. In many ways, H.'s failures seem to belie a form of *unwillingness* to exercise her capacity to resist oppression; they could be explained, broadly, as a lack of will power or some kind of defect in her will.

Failure to respect ourselves can therefore be understood as a failure of the will. Perhaps we are lacking in strength? This is where I find that the argument in favour of a duty of self-respect is insufficient. By explaining our failures of self-respect in terms of an *unwillingness* to resist, we continue to leave unanswered the sources of this apparent weakness of the will. I will return to this point in the last section of this paper. For now, let us examine what we are committed to when we blame ourselves or others for failures of self-respect.

3. The risks of blame

3.1 Blaming ourselves

While Bascara's argument addresses the victim-blaming objection by distinguishing between non-blameworthy failures or self-respect (e.g.: a victim of domestic violence) versus blameworthy or at least morally objectionable ones (e.g.: the woman who, although oppressed, is capable of striving for more self-respect, but is unwilling to do it), I nevertheless think that seeing self-

respect as a moral duty—where its presence is praiseworthy and its absence blameworthy—is riddled with risks. If the task is to be more self-respectful, won't self-blame further debilitate my self-respect? Self-blame could elicit disempowering emotions such as shame and guilt, which are pervasive affective patterns integral to oppression (Bartky, 1990), and which can significantly erode the basis for self-respect. Shame and guilt can be disempowering in that they involve perceiving oneself as diminished or defective. If shame and guilt are already integral parts of how the oppressed experience the world, a pervasive 'affective coloration' (Bartky, 1990) of their lives, then it is even more difficult to see how feeling shame or guilt for failing to be self-respectful can be anything but disempowering.

Shame and guilt are not, however, the only ways in which we react to perceived failures. Laura Silva has recently, and helpfully, articulated the notion of 'self-anger' (Silva 2022), an emotion that, unlike shame and guilt, does not tend to have disempowering effects. For Silva, self-anger 'seems to involve a strongly or fiercely *divided* self, where one-part reprimands the other in a confrontational, oppositional, manner that challenges its target' (Silva, 2022: 240). But this self-division in anger can have a motivational force; self-anger 'includes an element of optimism regarding the agent's ability to change this part of oneself, plausibly making it highly motivational' (Silva, 2022: 241). Moreover, empirical work shows that,

> Unlike either shame or guilt, self-anger often motivated the agent to seek the support of others (Ellsworth & Tong, 2006). (…) If this is so, self-anger may enjoy a further advantage, in addition to its highly motivational character, in the pursuit of self-change: self-angry agents may be able to create for themselves good conditions for self-improvement by recruiting the support and encouragement of their communities, which guilty and shameful agents may be less able to resort to. (Silva, 2022: 242)

I agree with Silva that self-anger could have more empowering effects than guilt and shame *in general*.[9] However, I am less optimistic about the positive effects of self-anger in the case of oppressed subjects. Oppression being a pervasive, difficult to change phenomenon, there may be repetitive instances of self-disrespect that may prompt repetitive instances of self-anger. I doubt that,

9 Other accounts however challenge this positive view of anger as motivational in the struggle for social justice. For Martha Nussbaum, anger is not a productive emotion and we should be wary of its effects, because it has in-built 'the idea of payback or retribution' (Nussbaum, 2016: 15). In this sense, it could be argued, self-anger would be accompanied by a desire for self-punishment, which can be seen as problematic for the purposes of empowering ourselves in order to be more respectful of ourselves. For recent discussions of Nussbaum's argument, and a defence of the value of anger in the struggle against oppression, see Srinivasan (2018) and Cherry (2021).

in the long run, self-anger can have these motivating positive effects and see more likely that it could transform itself instead in pervasive frustrations, such as 'why did you agree to this, *again*?!' or 'why have you disrespected yourself like this, *again*!?'. I doubt that the negative self-talk that self-anger involves can be helpful in this sense. All these negative affective reactions could further erode the basis we need to build for a better self-respect. Of course, blame need not take the form of negative self-talk, but it is perhaps one of the most common ways in which we exercise self-blame.

3.2 Blaming others

I have considered some of the ways in which blaming *ourselves* can be counter productive. But I think seeing failures of self-respect as blameworthy can encourage us to blame others for the ways in which, from our perspective, they seem to lack in self-respect. Considering some failures of self-respect as blameworthy can make us see those who fail in quite unsympathetic ways, particularly if we tend to understand failures of self-respect as due to an *unwillingness* to do otherwise. This perspective according to which some oppressed subjects are unwilling to respect themselves is perhaps the underlying factor in the contempt that I see expressed through derogatory epithets in the following passages of works by Wollstonecraft, Beauvoir and Fanon, authors that have each in their own way analysed how oppression tends to produce forms of complicity, through self-hatred and alienation, in the oppressed:

> One day a woman named Mayotte Capécia, obeying a motivation whose elements are difficult to detect, sat down to write 202 pages —her life— in which the most ridiculous ideas proliferated at random. (…) *Je suis Martiniquaise* is cut-rate merchandise, a sermon in praise of corruption (Fanon 2008: 29).

> Still the regal homage which [women] receive is so intoxicating, that till the manners of the times are changed, and formed on more reasonable principles, it may be impossible to convince them that the illegitimate power, which they obtain, by degrading themselves, is a curse, and that they must return to nature and equality, if they wish to secure the placid satisfaction that unsophisticated affections impart. Fragile in every sense of the word, they are obliged to look up to man for every comfort. In the most trifling dangers they cling to their support, with parasitical tenacity, piteously demanding succour; and their natural protector extends his arm, or lifts his voice, to guard the lovely trembler—from what? Perhaps the frown of an old cow, or the jump of a mouse; a rat, would be a danger. In the name of reason, and even common sense, what can save such beings from contempt; even though they be soft and fair? (Wollstonecraft 2014: 48).

> The [bourgeois] housewife (…) is unaware of the reach of the ideas she professes; the words she rattles off have lost all meaning in her mouth; the banker, the businessman, and even at times the general take risks, accepting exhaustion and problems; they purchase their privileges in an unfair market, but at least they pay for them themselves; for all they receive, their wives give nothing, do nothing in return; and they even more righteously believe in their imprescriptible rights with a blind faith. Their vain arrogance, their radical incapability, their stubborn ignorance, turn them into the most useless beings, the most idiotic that the human species has ever produced (Beauvoir 2011: 663).

The reader might disagree in seeing the previous passages as expressing *contempt* for the women they describe –although Wollstonecraft does state explicitly that they are contemptible– but might agree with the fact that such depictions are, at the very least, unsympathetic and severe. For Fanon, Capecia's 'ridiculous ideas' are 'cut-rate merchandise…in praise of corruption'; for Beauvoir, bourgeois women are the most 'useless' and 'idiotic' beings; in Wollstonecraft's description, they show parasitic tendencies which make them contemptible. Does judging people in this way for being insufficiently self-respecting when failing to escape oppressive situations equate to a form of disrespect? One might argue that these are general descriptions and that no individuals (except for Mayotte Capécia) are singled-out; nobody is disrespected in their personhood. But the way we judge people in general does have bearing on how we judge individuals. Casting blame for perceived failures of self-respect is likely to elicit unsympathetic attitudes in us, and this can hinder feelings of solidarity that we need to resist oppression.

I therefore do not find a good enough argument for seeing failures of self-respect as *blameworthy*.[10] Rather, self-blame tends to produce feelings of shame, guilt and self-anger in the oppressed. On the other hand, it seems to elicit contempt and a sense of moral superiority in those casting blame, thereby encouraging distancing behaviours which are inimical to solidarity.

If seeing failures of self-respect as blameworthy seems like a counterproductive route, does it still make sense to argue that we have a *duty* to respect ourselves? Of course, shame, guilt and self-anger, with all their negative self-talk, are not the only ways in which we can respond when we fail to uphold our moral duties.

10 The question of whether blaming ourselves is ever warranted or if there are other ways to hold ourselves responsible is a very complex one and examining goes beyond the scope of this chapter. My point here is not to discard blame altogether, but to question whether blame is warranted specifically for assessing failures of self-respect in oppressed subjects.

We could adopt a self-forgiving, loving perspective through which, when we fail, we could avoid the negative self-talk and focus on how we can improve ourselves. A defender of the duty to respect ourselves could then argue that this includes a duty to forgive ourselves when we fail. In fact, practicing self-forgiveness could be a way to start practicing a more respectful attitude towards us. However, this view seems to assume that self-forgiveness happens *by fiat*. If my patterns of self-disrespect are well-entrenched, self-forgiveness (and the self-loving attitude it presupposes) will, often, fail to happen. Failures of self-respect would then be compounded by my failures to forgive myself for failing.

I have argued so far against the view that failures of self-respect are blameworthy, which also leads us to argue against the view that there is a duty of self-respect. While we can conceive the existence of a duty without blame, as Young's (2011) 'social connection model of responsibility' does, this model is concerned with forms of collective responsibility, and not with addressing more personal, individual failures of self-respect. It is therefore difficult to argue that self-respect is a duty without seeing it as blameworthy in case we fail to uphold it. Bascara's point is that if we deny the self-regarding duty to emancipate, we are therefore denying agency to the oppressed, which further stigmatises them. Is there no way to defend the agency of the oppressed if we deny that there is a self-regarding duty to self-emancipate? I think the view that either we defend the duty to self-emancipate or we deny agency is a false dichotomy. We need not throw away the baby agency with the bathwater of duty. In the next section, I argue that there is another way in which the agency of the oppressed can be maintained, without necessarily ascribing to them a potentially blameworthy self-regarding duty to self-emancipate.

4. No duty to self-respect: A Spinozian perspective

In this last section, I would like to explore another possible way of addressing the problem of self-blame tied to the idea of a duty to respect ourselves. As I have discussed, Bascara's main argument in favour of a self-regarding duty to self-emancipate (which I discussed as a duty of self-respect) is that this is the only way to recognise that the oppressed have agency. Otherwise, we risk treating them only like passive beings. However, my discussion has aimed to show that seeing the failure to uphold duty as blameworthy has undesirable outcomes, which are inimical to self-respect and solidarity. This leads me to reject Bascara's argument. However, I argue that in following a Spinozian[11] perspective, the agency of the oppressed can still be recognised even if we deny

11 In this discussion, I am greatly indebted to Susan James' (2020) interpretation of Spinoza's thought.

that self-respect is a duty. Moreover, I contend that some of the pitfalls of blame and self-blame stem from the very conception we have of what it is to have a duty, and how a failure to fulfil the duty is accounted for.

As we saw in section 3, different philosophical traditions and perspectives explain the failure to uphold the duty of self-respect in terms of a *failure of the will:* laziness and cowardice (Kant); arrogance and close-mindedness (Medina, 2013), stubbornness (Knowles, 2021). These can come under the heading of an *unwillingness* (Bascara, 2020) to exercise our capacity for a more autonomous way of living. In this way, we could appeal to a Heideggerian sense of resoluteness to break these patterns of self-disrespect, or, in Kantian terms, to a sense of courage pushing us to love ourselves: *amare te ipsum aude!*[12] Spinoza also grappled with the issue of why we fail to free ourselves from the forces that maintain us in a position of *bondage*. If we take that desiring self-emancipation is desiring something good for us, our failure to seek self-emancipation can be due to two main causes: either we lack adequate knowledge about what is *good* for us (1), or we have an adequate knowledge of what is good for us, and yet… we choose what is bad (2). While the first case seems relatively straightforward to address – I only need the relevant adequate knowledge to choose what is best for me— the second case offers a more puzzling picture. Spinoza famously expressed this conundrum by quoting from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* VII, 'I see and approve of the better, but follow the worse' (Curley, 1994: 208 n.2). Remember H. here, who knows what is best (not to go out with A.) and she approves of it, but ends up choosing what is worse (going out with A).[13]

H.'s case shows the difficulty to exercise what Spinoza calls *fortitude*, that is, to act 'in the light of our knowledge.' (James, 2020). Are H.'s failures a symptom of a fundamental *unwillingness* to seek self-emancipation? In the previous sections, we saw that when we attribute these failures to our laziness, cowardice, stubbornness or unwillingness, we presuppose that they belie a *weakness of the will*. To the extent that these can be characterised as failures of rationality, this explanation follows what Susan James identifies as the Aquinian model: 'One of the ways we fail to be rational (…) is because the will is disinclined to do what reason demands on account of some difficulty. To overcome this, we need strength of mind'. (James, 2020: 203) The idea is that we can exercise

12 I thank Sergio Rojas Peralta for helping me with the latin translation for "'have the courage to love thyself!'", mirroring Kant's '*sapere aude*!'

13 This does not mean that seeing what is best but doing what is worse necessarily implies an adequate knowledge, but in some cases, despite having an adequate knowledge, our actions can be at odds with it. For the sake of the discussion, I will assume that H. does have an adequate understanding but her way of feeling and acting is in contradiction with it.

our will to exercise our 'power to put our knowledge to work.' (James 2020: 198) Failures to exercise this power, failures to think for ourselves and not to disrespect ourselves by submitting to what others think or want, are all the more condemnable because they are seen, on the Aquinian model, as failures of our will. If only we *really* wanted, we would! If we do not, it is because we are somehow *refusing* to will something that we should, and willing it is something that falls under our control. We just need to will harder!

However, understanding our failure to exercise fortitude in terms of weakness of our will is challenged by Spinoza; 'we cannot simply will ourselves to exercise fortitude' (James 2020: 204). For Spinoza, the gap or incoherence between our knowledge of what's best and how badly we end up acting is not a matter of a weakness of the will. Rather, putting it in these terms leads us to adopt a stance that satisfies itself with condemnation and blame, a sterile philosophical position that Spinoza attributes to the moralists of his time: 'And they attribute the cause of human impotence and inconstancy, not to the common power of nature, but to I know not what vice of human nature, which they therefore bewail, or laugh at, or disdain, or (as usually happens), curse' (Spinoza, E3, Preface).[14] Think again of the way Beauvoir, Fanon or Wollstonecraft seem to disdain the oppressed who show forms of submissiveness. Are not the latter a more recent manifestation of the kind of moralism that in Spinoza's view showed a preference to 'curse or laugh at the effects and actions of men, rather than understand them?'(E3, Preface) It seems Spinoza was also concerned with the kind of self-satisfied, 'holier-than-thou' attitude these positions elicited in those who cast blame against the weak-willed, when he states: 'And he who knows how to censure more eloquently and cunningly the weakness of the human mind is held to be godly' (E3, Preface). We can expect little solidarity and cooperation if we distance ourselves in such manners from those who we see as *unwilling*, stubborn or lazy...

How then should we account for cases such as Jaeggi's 'H.' if we shift from the Aquinian model to a Spinozian perspective? How does the Spinozian model allow us to respect the agency of individuals, without ascribing them a duty to respect themselves?

For Spinoza, the gap between what we know, what we approve of, and how we end up behaving or feeling, does not belie a weak will or a lazy, cowardly or stubborn mind. Instead, it is one in which our understanding is still lacking

14 The standard notation for citing Spinoza's Ethics is used here, referring to the edition found in Curley (1994).

something. Moreover, the very fact that we need to represent to ourselves self-respect as a self-regarding duty indicates that we have not yet been able to fully extract the consequences of what we know. In a way, we know from one perspective, but in another sense, this knowledge remains elusive. This has to do with the nature of our mind and with the way our imagination tends to function. Just as we often keep imagining things in ways that do not correspond to their true nature, despite having the relevant knowledge about this (think of optical illusions), we often continue desiring things that we know are not good for us. This is why, Spinoza explains, true knowledge as *true* is insufficient to eliminate some of the ways in which we imagine things. This has an affective correlation; we do not stop desiring some things just because we know them to be bad for us. Spinoza writes that 'the true knowledge, of good and evil, insofar as it is true, cannot restrain any affect'. (E4p14d). Just as the ideas of our imagination can only be excluded by stronger ones, our affects can only be shifted by stronger affects (E4p7) and not simply by true knowledge *as true*. Our knowledge, however, can take an affective dimension. We call something good if it affects us with joy, i.e., 'something that increases our power of acting.' (E4p8D). We call something bad if it decreases this power and therefore affects us with sadness. Again, Spinoza writes, 'the knowledge of good and evil is nothing but an effect of joy or sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it.' (E4p8).

Let's go back and see how this plays out in the kind of cases we have been discussing as having to do with self-respect. Is H. showing a form of laziness, cowardice or stubbornness by going out with A. despite knowing best? For Spinoza, the puzzling case can be explained by the fact that two different causal chains are at play: that of the true or adequate ideas, and that of the effects. If we often have a good 'intellectual' understanding of things, but our feelings seem to lack this knowledge, it is because the understanding that we have is still insufficient. Our understanding has yet to take an affective shape, and in order to do so we need to develop a deeper kind of knowledge that would allow us to understand our affects and the reasons why we act in the ways we do. H. knows best, and acts worse, not because she has a weak will, but because the affective dimension of her knowledge of what is best (joy) is still weak compared to the affective aspect of her desire for what is worse (go out with A.). In this sense, for H. to have a more self-respecting attitude, it would be useless to say 'just love yourself harder' or 'be courageous!' These injunctions cannot have a solid grip on H.'s behaviour and will be soon washed away by the intensity of her desire for A.'s love, which 'stubbornly clings to [her].' (E4p6). It is, in this sense, useless to think of self-respect as a duty because she cannot simply will herself to change her way of feeling and acting.

This does not mean, however, that H. is condemned to remain a passive sufferer of her desire for A., and that she cannot articulate a form of active resistance that will eventually allow her to develop a more self-respecting attitude. For H. to do so, a shift must happen in the intensity that underpins her knowledge of what is best, and her desire for what is worse. As we explained, the effect associated with her knowledge (joy) needs to become stronger than her desire for A.: 'An affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained' (E4p7). But this cannot simply happen *by fiat*. I will conclude this section by examining how a Spinozian framework can give us a set of possible explanations for H.'s struggle with self-respect and a more solid idea of how she can become more actively resistant than by merely thinking this is her duty (and blaming herself for failing).

First, H.s' struggles to increase her self-respect could be compounded by the fact that the empowering, joyful affect she derives from her feminist understandings of oppression will always be counteracted by the force of disempowering, dreadful affective consequences of oppression. This is mainly due to a difference in power between individual versus social forces: 'There is no singular thing in Nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger' (E4A1). This idea can account for the difference in power between H.'s individual mind on the one hand, and the bigger 'social mind' that, through ideologies and institutions, incessantly reproduces harmful sexist prejudices. While H.'s mind does strive for resistance through her feminist commitments, she might understandably grow tired from swimming against the current of ubiquitous sexism she comes up against daily: 'The force by which [H.] perseveres in existing is limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes' (E4p3).

Secondly, H.'s struggles could be explained by the way our *experience of time* can affect the intensity with which we feel certain things: 'the image of a future or past thing (…) is weaker than the image of a present thing; and consequently, an affect toward a future or past thing is milder, other things equal, than an affect toward a present thing' (E4P9Cor.). For example, we could imagine that H.'s feminist commitments, her knowledge of what is best for her, are recent compared to her desire to be loved, which has inhabited her for most of her life, shaping even how her body moves and reacts to men ('giggling'). In this sense, her desire for romantic love is more present because more enduring than her knowledge of what is convenient according to her feminist ideas. H. might need therefore to cultivate her feminist knowledge for a longer period, until it becomes as habitual, or indeed more, than her desire for the kind of love she

has been longing for.

Finally, and related to the previous point, H.'s difficulty can be tied to the way our minds tend to relate to ethical or political ideals, which we imagine will be realised in the future. However, we typically feel more intensely that which we imagine as existing in the present than that which we imagine in the future: 'an effect toward a thing which we know does not exist in the present, and which we imagine as contingent, is much milder than if we imagined the thing as with us in the present' (E4p12Cor.). and 'an affect toward a thing which we imagine will exist at a time far from the present is much milder than if we imagined it as present' (E4p12Dem). Our knowledge of what is best and more convenient for us places this ideal in a future that competes with more immediate (and, arguably, less good) forms of pleasure. H. knows, ideally, that she should stop expecting love from A., but the pleasure she gets from the present reality of these encounters obliterates the affective force of this knowledge: 'A desire which arises from a true knowledge of good and evil, insofar as this knowledge concerns the future, can be quite easily restrained or extinguished by a desire for the pleasure of the moment' (E4p16).

Now that we have some explanatory elements allowing us to potentially understand the reasons for H.'s self-alienation, it becomes clear why it does not make sense to see self-respect as a blameworthy duty: if H. systematically fails to show self-respect, it is not because she is cowardly, stubborn, or unwilling. Or indeed, she might be all those things, but they insufficiently explain her impotence. Spinoza's perspective allows us to delve deeper into the affective complexities of what might be going on 'behind' H.'s apparent unwillingness. In consequence, we can also better understand why it is insufficient for H. to simply will herself to act according to her feminist knowledge, and by the same token, why blame and condemnation belie a fundamental misunderstanding of the reasons behind H.'s failures. (Moreover, insofar as H. continues to think of self-respect as a duty, it is because this ideal remains distant and abstract.) Rather than simply condemning our cowardice and appealing to our courage as the way to 'move' and strengthen our will, Spinoza's perspective encourages us to carefully understand the causes behind our impotence. In this sense, it helps us to develop a way of self-understanding that will eventually grow into a more adequate self-knowledge, thereby allowing us to increase our power to act 'in light of our knowledge' and becoming more capable of self-respect.

Throughout this paper I have touched on what was often a motive of disagreement between Rachelle Bascara and I. By addressing this difficult issue, I have tried to clarify what were the grounds for our disagreement and

attempted to think of ways in which she could have found some of my reasoning more compelling. I have argued that we need not defend the strong claim that the oppressed have a duty to respect themselves to respect their (our) agency. In following a Spinozian model that does not explain failures of resistance in terms of a weakness of the will, I have aimed to highlight a path that, despite not assigning a duty to resist, still indicates the possibility of an active resistance. This, however, requires first acknowledging the reality of passivity; the fact that under oppression people's capacity for agency is undeniably thwarted, to different degrees. The Spinozian perspective I have aimed to highlight in this section might still be unsatisfying for Bascara, given her strong commitment to a defence of the agency of the oppressed. Although Bascara's account does leave room for some situations in which people *effectively* lack agency, these are thought as exceptional because extreme, while the Spinozian view makes the lack of power a more banal and common experience. In this sense, the perspective I have developed in this section is vulnerable to Bascara's objection that it still robs people of their agency. However, recognising the reality of passivity need not lead us to the pessimistic conclusion according to which the oppressed cannot develop the tools allowing them to increase their agency and, in so doing, to strive for emancipation. Although the Spinozian view indicates a path that is, in Spinoza's own terms, is 'as difficult as rare', it can still offer a more effective way of empowerment than the injunction according to which we must will ourselves out of internalised oppression.

Without necessarily subscribing to Spinoza's strong metaphysical commitments, and without necessarily having to account for the difficulties in undoing internalised oppression through his system, we can at least share his thought that, in order to strive towards emancipation, it is more useful to try to understand what ties maintain us in a position of bondage, in order to start undoing them. Rather than ascribing to ourselves a self-regarding duty to resist, and blaming ourselves for frequently failing, the modest task of untying the knots of internalised oppression seems to me like a promising path, but it might still seem to Bascara like an unconvincing one.

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