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Towards Self-Emancipation: Thoughts on Overcoming Oppression

Abstract: Political philosophers who articulate duties to challenge and transform oppressive conditions tend to direct their imperatives towards the relatively privileged. Yet history gives us little reason to believe that those who are privileged in oppressive situations will take sufficient action to overcome oppression. This article argues that the oppressed have a duty to self-emancipate and defends this thesis against two potential objections: firstly, that in placing an onerous duty on those already at the sharp end of existing social arrangements it risks blaming the victim; secondly, that its emphasis on the antagonism of interests between privileged and oppressed is unhelpfully divisive. I further theorize self-emancipation as a collective duty that devolves into individual duties in complex and contextual ways. In attributing duties to individuals, we must be attentive to the double binds and prisoners' dilemmas that arise in what I dub *perverse moral contexts*.

Preliminary note by Koshka Duff

This article is based on the final chapter of Dara's doctoral thesis.[1] Its argument, authorial 'I', and the bulk of the text are hers. Dara spoke of oppression from the perspective of a Filipino woman, a migrant in the US and later the UK, with a background in Marxist anti-imperialist struggles as well as an elite education in analytic philosophy, and a complex relationship with both. Precariously located in an academic space where it is common (if not safe) to assume a dominantly situated subject as both author and reader, Dara was acutely aware of her distance from both the norms of that space and the experiences of the global majority who will never enter it. She knew gendered, racial, and colonial violence intimately, not abstractly, and until her death in 2021 remained involved in struggles for justice and liberation.

My contribution has been to edit the piece into an article that I hope presents her ideas in their strongest form. Guided by my memory of our many conversations, I have refined, expanded, and occasionally amended points in line with what I take to be the overall purpose and spirit of the project. Beyond this, I have carried out some light restructuring, updated and enriched the citations, and added notes contextualizing the argument with reference to other parts of her thesis. My most substantive interventions have been around making the piece

1 'Ch. 8: Thoughts on Overcoming Oppression' in Rachelle Dyanne Bascara, 'Towards a Unified Theory of Oppression'.

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more attentive to the ongoing role of legal, state, and policing institutions in perpetuating oppression.

Introduction

Audre Lorde (2018) famously said that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Yet, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore points out:

> Like any theoretical premise, Lorde's caveat is useful only if the elements whose paring away enables its elegance and urgency are added back, so that the general truth of the abstraction has concrete meaning for day-to-day life. The issue is not whether the master uses, or endorses the use of, some tool or another. Rather, who controls the conditions and ends to which any tools are wielded. (2022: 79)

On this reading, Lorde is posing a question of agency. *Who* is to take the processes of tearing down and building society anew into their own hands? What does it mean – from the perspective of the oppressed, and against every tendency for our liberatory efforts to be co-opted into the reinforcement of existing power structures – to make the forms of our struggle truly ours? In the register of moral imperatives, we can ask the closely related question: whose duty is it to overcome oppression?

Political philosophers who articulate duties to challenge and transform oppressive conditions tend to direct their imperatives, implicitly or explicitly, towards the relatively privileged, that is, towards the beneficiaries of the *status quo*. I do not disagree that responsibility should fall, morally speaking, primarily on the privileged. Yet that is not what I want to theorize about. This is not only because there is already so much literature on the duties and responsibilities of the privileged, but because my fundamental concern is with how oppression can *in reality* be overcome. And history gives us little reason to believe that those who are privileged in oppressive situations will take sufficient action to overcome oppression. Dominantly situated subjects who benefit (at least relatively) from an oppressive situation are unlikely to voluntarily relinquish the power, status, freedom, and material comforts that position brings – not without significant pressure from 'below'. If some do, we can expect that the majority will not. In the familiar words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: 'We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed' (King, Jr., 1991: 72).

This article argues that the oppressed have a duty to self-emancipate and defends this thesis against two potential objections: firstly, that in placing an onerous duty on those already at the sharp end of existing social arrangements it risks

blaming the victim; secondly, that its emphasis on the antagonism of interests between privileged and oppressed is unhelpfully divisive. I further theorize self-emancipation as a collective duty that devolves into individual duties in complex and contextual ways. In attributing duties to individuals, we must be attentive to the double binds and prisoners' dilemmas that arise in what I dub *perverse moral contexts*.

Section 1 (A Prevailing Narrative: Duty of the Privileged) considers Dale Jamieson's account of moral progress as an example of 'privileged-first' theorizing: a narrative told from the perspective of the privileged that assigns this group a pre-eminent role in overcoming oppression. In section 2 (An Alternative Narrative: Duty of the Oppressed), I argue that the limitations of this approach can only be overcome by recognizing the oppressed as having a duty to self-emancipate. Section 3 (From Collective to Individual Duty: Three Challenges) considers the complexity of translating collective duties into individual ones in contexts of uneven and intersecting oppressions. The final section (Overcoming Oppression Through Self-Emancipation) proposes a modified 'bottom-up' version of Jamieson's four-stage process, drawing on a Marxist understanding of class consciousness and revolutionary praxis.

First, though, it will be helpful to clarify some key concepts. I understand oppression through a republican lens, as a form of group-based domination.[2] Schematically, Group A oppresses Group B whenever members of Group A have the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with members of Group B by virtue of their respective group memberships, and some agents in Group A exercise the capacity, which results in harm to some members of Group B. This way of articulating the concept of oppression shapes how I formulate the task of overcoming oppression. However, my argument for a duty to self-emancipate does not ultimately rely on this analysis and could be translated into other vocabularies.

There are important moral distinctions between those who are privileged due to their (often unchosen) social group membership, and those who are properly called 'oppressors'.[3] I reserve this morally loaded term for members of a privileged group who choose to exercise their power to arbitrarily interfere with members of the oppressed group. That is, they act in such a way as to cause harm (whether through commission or omission) to the oppressed by not taking their interests sufficiently into account. Privileged individuals who choose not to act in these ways are still members of an oppressing group, and will tend to

2 This account is developed in 'Towards a Unified Theory of Oppression' (Bascara, 2020).

3 We find support for this distinction in Charles Mills (1997: 11), Sally Haslanger (2013: 316–317), and Ann Cudd (2006). See Bascara (2020: 138–140).

benefit from this membership, but are not necessarily oppressors. In practice, of course, the distinction will often be messy, and how we draw it will depend on our understanding of responsibility for structural injustice, among other things.[4] In this article I use 'the privileged' to refer to both the (merely) privileged and the (active) oppressors. Given the multiple and intersecting nature of existing forms of oppression – hierarchies of race, gender, class, citizenship, disability, sexuality, colonialism, and so on – the designations 'privileged/oppressor/oppressed' should be understood relationally.

A Prevailing Narrative: Duty of the Privileged

A dominant narrative is that the privileged have a duty to overcome oppression, but this way of advancing justice achieves only sporadic and often hollow progress. When corporations and police forces fly rainbow flags and universities adopt diversity and inclusion agendas while partnering with arms companies, a veneer of progress papers over practices of profit-making and social control that continue to hit oppressed groups hardest. Even where progress is genuine, we see disproportionate credit given to the actions of privileged agents in bringing it about. This obscures the complex dynamics of social struggle, including action by the oppressed, upon which these transformations depend. Moreover, it is a narrative told from the perspective of the privileged, and as such reproduces political theory and action as domains from which the oppressed are generally excluded and can enter only at the grace of their dominantly situated counterparts.

Jamieson's Four Stages of Moral Progress

In 'Is there progress in morality?', Dale Jamieson lists four stages to moral progress in relation to a subordinated group. Jamieson (2002: 318) characterizes moral progress as 'occur[ing] when a subsequent state of affairs is better than a preceding one, or when right acts become increasingly prevalent.' He identifies 'the abolition of war and slavery, the reduction of poverty and class privilege, the extension of liberty, the empowerment of marginalized groups, and respect for animals and nature' as things that would count as moral progress (*ibid.*: 321). Much of what Jamieson identifies as moral progress could be described as the overcoming of various forms of oppression.[5]

Jamieson states that 'moral progress with respect to a subordinated group has four stages' (*ibid.*: 336). First, there must be a recognition of injustice and

4 Some of these complexities are addressed in 'Ch. 7: Responsibility for Oppression' (Bascara, 2020).

5 Particularly if we recognize nonhuman animals as subject to oppression, and the destructive exploitation of the beyond-human world as deeply entangled with the oppressive logics of colonial capitalism (see e.g. McNeill, 2022; Gillespie and Collard, 2015). While Jamieson's work tends to focus on (non-human) animals and nature, in this essay he explicitly considers how moral progress can be achieved with respect to subordinated (human) collectives.

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the practice of subordination. The recognition of an injustice must be clearly 'presenting a moral issue, as opposed to a question of taste, etiquette, or personal preference' (*ibid.*). Second, there is a paternalistic defense of the subordinated. Jamieson notes that, in this second stage, 'we come to see [the subordinated] as objects of morally admirable charity' (*ibid.*: 337). Third is the move from the view that the oppressed require charity to the view that they have rights not to be harmed. Finally, Jamieson argues that people are entitled to what they need to realize their ends. The fourth stage requires a shift in perspective in the sense that 'we may come to see [the oppressed] as bearers of "positive rights"' (*ibid.*: 337).

Jamieson's account, which sees the privileged undertake certain steps to emancipate the oppressed and thereby achieve moral progress or justice, finds support in the partial histories often told of social transformations like the abolition of North-Atlantic chattel slavery and the enfranchisement of women in Western societies. We hear much of the non-Black abolitionists – especially wealthy men like William Wilberforce – who argued in courts and parliaments on behalf of slaves and for the abolition of slavery (while, in many cases, continuing to support colonialism and racial domination in other forms).[6] We hear much less of the Haitian revolution in which enslaved people rose up on their own behalf, defeating three colonial powers in the process (Trouillot, 2015). Likewise, liberal histories tend to misrepresent feminism as a fairly recent, Western discovery.[7] 'Father of liberalism' John Stuart Mill is so valorized for his efforts on behalf of women's suffrage (UK Parliament, 2019) that, as Lorna Finlayson (2016: 55) writes, 'at times we could be forgiven for thinking that [feminism] was a nineteenth-century invention of J. S. Mill himself'.

Emancipatory efforts have brought about positive changes that Jamieson might call progress. If we look at contemporary self-identifying liberal Western societies, slavery has been formally abolished and, on paper at least, women are now men's political equals. Much explicitly racist and sexist legislation has been overturned. A certain kind of officially sanctioned subordination, while not absent – consider the intransigence of institutional racism and misogyny – is at least disreputable in most contemporary Western societies. Yet in many ways these emancipatory projects remain profoundly unfinished and their achievements fragile.

6 The role of white abolitionists is problematized in Hartman (2022).

7 Not just the term 'feminism' – whose provenance is indeed specific – but the very idea and practice of challenging patriarchal oppression.

Problems of Paternalistic Emancipation

A quick survey of statistics is sufficient to demonstrate that, despite apparent legal equality, oppression continues for these supposedly emancipated social groups. We see persistent wealth and pay gaps (Hanks et al., 2018; Women's Budget Group, 2024), unequal health outcomes and access to healthcare (Bailey et al., 2024; Shahvisi and Finnerty, 2019), and vastly differential rates of criminalization and incarceration (Alexander, 2011; Elliott-Cooper, 2019), amid widespread gendered and racialized violence (Amnesty International, 2026; Refuge, 2017).

Contrary to right-wing legitimizing narratives, the inequality that persists in post-civil rights Western societies cannot be explained as the result of free choice and fair play. Even without coercive legislation explicitly aimed at guaranteeing social group inequality, dominant liberal institutions from police and border forces to schools and welfare services systematically operate in ways that harm marginalized groups and perpetuate their subordinate status (see, for example, Duff and Kemp, 2024; Graham, 2016; Lazar, 2019; Neocleous, 2008; Rossdale and Manchanda, 2021; Wacquant, 2009). Cultural, economic, and other social forces within and beyond the state have given birth to new forms of oppression that are often more insidious and difficult to pin down (Berlant, 2011; Mills, 2007; Spade and Willse, 2015).

A central reason why the removal of certain overtly unjust and oppressive laws did not deliver emancipation is that the process of emancipation has been hijacked by the privileged. Indeed, the disproportionate focus on legal reform within the framework of liberal capitalist order may itself be a symptom of such hijacking. The story of moral progress Jamieson tells is told from the perspective of the privileged, and human beings can be expected (by and large, other things being equal) to protect their own interests. The privileged cannot advocate forms of radical change that will benefit the oppressed because doing so would be detrimental to them and their interests. Although, in a superficial sense, it is in the slave master's and wealthy landlord's interests not to be called oppressors, what is even more against their interests is the loss of their right to own other human beings or their right to do as they please with their property.[8] 'Solutions' that ease the consciences and polish the reputations of the privileged by defusing (or outright suppressing) accusations of injustice tend to be more appealing than actually giving up the advantages they accrue under white supremacy, patriarchy, etc. Thus, the channelling of transformational energies into on-paper reforms that leave substantive hierarchies intact.

8 Observe the phenomenon of white people more upset about being called racist than about non-white people suffering from racism – and more determined to prevent the former than the latter.

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If moral progress is 'the removal or reduction of injustice without the same or similar injustice being shifted elsewhere so that the benefits of the abandoned injustice are continued by other questionable means' (Ci, 2010: 97), then the removal of blatantly subordinating laws where *de facto* subordination persists cannot count as, all things considered, meaningful moral progress. For example, if the repeal of laws against 'miscegenation' is followed by people continuing to avoid certain relationships based on preferences shaped by racism, that is not moral progress, as Nathaniel Adam Tobias ~~Coleman~~ argues in *The Duty to Miscegenate* (2013).

In short, whilst it is important to acknowledge that some progress has been achieved – for instance, many women have won the right to vote[9] – until we deal in a more systematic way with the persistence of substantive oppression, including economic exploitation and marginalization, and normalized violence through institutions like the police and the family, the project of emancipation is unfinished. Moral progress will be stunted. So, to make headway in the project of improving conditions of oppression, the oppressed have a responsibility to emancipate themselves because it is unrealistic to rely on the mere goodwill of the privileged. The subordinated need to play an active role in their liberation and quest for equality.

When we judge a situation as unjust (as opposed to merely unfortunate), it necessarily follows that there are agents required to correct it. If the agents required to correct it 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. Instead, responsibility shifts to others.

Take the case of an abandoned child. If the child's assumed primary caregivers (in our societies, usually their parent(s)) are unwilling to fulfill their responsibility to the child, they may be 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 may think, for instance, that other relatives or community-members need to take responsibility. If there are no relatives or community-members in a position to do so, we look to the rest of society, like the state or social services. Problems with these institutions notwithstanding (state-led 'family policing' and the nuclear family model are notoriously imbricated in gender, race, and class oppression (O'Brien, 2023; Threadcraft, 2014)), the point is that the duty to the child remains. Likewise, the duty to overcome oppression.

9 Many women are still denied the right to vote due to citizenship restrictions, voter ID requirements and other voter suppression measures, and the disenfranchisement of incarcerated people of all genders.

An Alternative Narrative: Duty of the Oppressed

Jamieson's account speaks to the role of the privileged and the oppressors in moral progress. It does not directly speak to the role of the oppressed. In that sense, this is an account told from the point of view of the privileged, even if Jamieson does not explicitly say so. It can be surmised from his consistent use of the pronoun 'we' that he is speaking as a member of the privileged group and for a presumed privileged audience. He also consistently uses the pronoun 'them' to refer to subordinated groups. Considering the shortcomings of paternalistic emancipation, I need to replace this account with a theoretical perspective from the point of view of the oppressed. This account will not rely on the goodwill of the privileged and on paternalistic emancipation.

This alternative narrative calls on the oppressed to overcome their oppression and in doing so resonates with numerous intersecting traditions of revolutionary theory and practice. Marxism emphasizes the historical agency of the proletariat. Black Radical and anti-colonial thinkers demonstrate the essential role of self-emancipatory action in histories of struggle against oppression, from slave revolts and practices of 'marronage' to boycotts, strikes, and riots (Hartman, 2019; James, 1989; Sivanandan, 1981; Williams, 2014). Frantz Fanon famously recognized the necessity of action by colonialism's most despised and downtrodden subjects, the so-called lumpenproletariat or 'wretched of the earth', in any genuine liberation – a theme taken up by anti-racists and prison activists in the United States (Bloom and Martin, 2013; Davis et al., 1971; Fanon, 2004; Newton, 2002; Rossdale, 2021). In contemporary political philosophy, Candice Delmas in *A Duty to Resist* (2018) highlights countless instances where resistance by the oppressed has been essential to countering injustice, while Daniel Silvermint (2013) explores the obligation of the victims of oppression to resist.

No Duty vs. Duty of the Oppressed

So, do the oppressed have a duty to overcome oppression? There are two possibilities. One view is that the duty to overcome oppression falls on the privileged, and if they do nothing, then no one else has any duty. We will call this the *No Duty* view. Alternatively, the oppressed might be deemed partly responsible for their oppression – the oppressed must overcome oppression themselves.[10] We will call this the *Duty of the Oppressed* view.

10 The responsibility at issue here is primarily forward-looking, insofar as it is equivalent to the claim that the oppressed have a duty to rectify the situation. There may also be backward-looking responsibility where the persistence of structural oppression is in part due to individuals' compliance and participation in unjust practices, norms, rules, institutions, and states of affairs (Bascara, 2020: 205).

On the *No Duty* view, any action taken by the oppressed to overcome oppression is supererogatory. As the group liable to harm, they have no duty to fight oppression. On such a view, any actions taken by the oppressed are good but not morally required. The alternative narrative is that the oppressed have a duty to overcome oppression. This duty is owed by the oppressed to themselves and to each other. The *Duty of the Oppressed* is grounded both by the general argument that there is a duty to promote justice, which falls on everyone, and there is no decisive reason to think that the oppressed are automatically exempt from it, as well as by the duty to oneself (the self-regarding duty).

Proponents of the *No Duty* view may argue that while the oppressed might have a right to self-emancipate, there is no duty to do so. Here, an analogy with self-defense could be drawn. While there are different views on how far the right to self-defense extends, there is general consensus that individuals have the right to take proportionate action to protect themselves against a threat of harm.[11] Self-defense is enshrined in many legal systems. While, in practice, claims of self-defense tends to be more readily accepted when police officers kill Black people or white homeowners 'stand their ground' against perceived intruders than when women of color defend themselves from patriarchal violence,[12] political philosophers do not explicitly argue for restricting the right of self-defense to privileged groups. Outside a religious frame of reference,[13] however, there is very little discussion of a *duty* to self-defense. Likewise, one may argue that while the oppressed have the right to self-emancipation, there is no such duty.

Where will this leave us? The oppressed may not be responsible on an interactional level for the oppression of themselves and others. They are not usually the ones arbitrarily interfering with their or others' interests and even if they are, they are not doing so *qua* member of an oppressive group. When the oppressed act in ways that are detrimental to their interests, it is usually because there are penalties for their non-compliance with unjust norms. However, like everyone else, the oppressed – as members of political associations and participants in social institutions – share in the responsibility for the repair or abolition of unjust institutions. This alone causes me to reject the *No Duty* view. And to reiterate a point above, the privileged and the oppressors are unlikely

11 An exception to the general consensus includes some absolute pacifists, who argue against the personal right to self-defense, even in the case of the threat of death, where it would be better to be killed than to kill. This view is rejected by other pacifists, including Gandhi, as an unattainable ideal (Gandhi and Andrews, 1932).

12 See, for instance, Irvin (2022) and the Survived & Punished campaign.

13 Charl Van Wyk (2007) argues that there is a Biblical duty to self-defense.

to voluntarily give up their privileges. Even if some individuals make serious attempts to fulfil their duty to overcome oppression, there are still concerns about paternalistic emancipation.

Therefore, to hold the view that there is no duty to self-emancipate is to believe that there is no (possibly rectifiable) injustice. This is because, from the perspective of justice, if there is oppression, someone or some agents have a duty to overcome it. If the duty is not fulfilled, the injustice persists, and there are others (namely, the oppressed) who can do something about it, then to hold the view that such others have no duty to rectify the injustice is incoherent. If there is nothing that anyone can do, then it is not an injustice (simply an unfortunate 'given') and therefore not a case of oppression.

Moreover, with oppression, the difference to cases of individual self-defense is that there are other people involved – there is a collective. As such, I have a duty not only to myself but to others oppressed like myself. I cannot rest merely with the judgment that the oppressors and the privileged who do not take sufficient action to overcome oppression are culpable.

There is also a positive side to this argument. By allowing the duty to emancipate to fall on the oppressed, there is recognition of the agency of the oppressed. Emancipation efforts can be conducive to the development of this agency. As Fanon (2004) argues, there is a distinctive quality to emancipation achieved through one's own action, namely the self-transformation it engenders. To be in a social position where one is susceptible to or suffers from arbitrary interference is a state of powerlessness.[14] Part of being oppressed involves having your capacities undermined and being unable to self-determine. Consequently, part of the project of an oppressed group's emancipation is the collective exercise of the capacity to self-determine the terms of emancipation and, where appropriate, to articulate demands of restitution as a collective.

An Objection: Blaming the Victim

In assigning responsibility to the oppressed for their own emancipation, do I burden them even further? How can I, for example, expect other victims of sexual violence to bear the additional burden of responsibility for overcoming sexualized oppression? When the oppressed develop a collective consciousness of their predicament, they face a choice: either accept that things are the way

14 The account of oppression developed in 'Towards a Unified Theory of Oppression' draws on Iris Marion Young's 'Five Faces of Oppression' (1990: Ch. 2). It argues that 'powerlessness is the most fundamental because it captures the condition of the exploited, marginalized, culturally imperialized, and the victims of group-based violence. Young's Five Faces are five types of harm to which powerless people are vulnerable' (Bascara 2020, 78).

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they are, or try to change how things are. If their common suffering is sufficiently grave, they may be compelled towards collective action to change how things are, particularly if they recognize their own agency to do so.

The agency of the oppressed is, however, a nuanced matter. When we ascribe responsibility for emancipation to the oppressed, we are ascribing responsibility to a disorganized collective. How that responsibility distributes or devolves to the individual agents that make up the collective turns on specific individual and contextual considerations, such as the individual's knowledge, capacity, and relationship to the harm and injustice. Individuals can be excused from this responsibility when the cost is too high. At other times, when others default on their responsibility to emancipate, the responsibility does not disappear, and the ones who are most able must take up the slack.

We can make a distinction like that sometimes drawn between 'victims' and 'survivors' of sexual violence. It becomes more plausible to assign responsibility to the oppressed if we distinguish between those who can and cannot take responsibility. We can say that victims of sexual violence (or other forms of oppressive violence) do not have a responsibility to self-emancipate, whereas survivors do. Something like the Marxist idea of class consciousness can be invoked to ground this distinction; it is the survivors, or those that have undergone a political awakening and gained class consciousness, that bear responsibility for emancipation. It is the responsibility of survivors to exhort others to join in, to engage with victims, and to provide guidance on how to become survivors.[15] It is precisely in these types of dialogues that, for example, ameliorative concepts can come to life, like sexual harassment or post-natal depression (as Miranda Fricker (2007: 149) demonstrates in her work on epistemic injustice).

To say I am a survivor in this sense does not mean that my oppression is a thing of the past, nor that I will never be subject to some overwhelmingly capacity-impairing episode of subjugation in the future. In many cases where oppression is ongoing, there can be no such guarantees. Yet, without reifying these categories, we can still recognize that different people, and the same people at different times, may be in dramatically divergent places with respect to their capacities to comprehend and resist the oppression which they nonetheless all suffer.

15 A concern might be that this seems to imply that those among the oppressed who support reactionary ideologies (Trad Wife influencers, for instance, or Black politicians and police-chiefs who enact racist policies) are by that very measure exempted from the duty to self-emancipate. I agree that these cases may be quite different from those where someone is incapacitated through extremes of material hardship, constrained options, and ongoing violence. Whether or not we think of them as 'victims', though, the response I gave to the *Duty of the Privileged* view also applies here: these people do have a duty to overcome oppression but, insofar as they are unlikely to, the duty passes on to others who have the capacity and consciousness to discharge it – the survivors, in my account.

It is important to recognize that it falls to those members of the oppressed I am calling survivors not only to participate in struggles for emancipation, but in many cases to lead them – and to fight against their co-option or hollowing out by the privileged. The oppressed cannot simply stand side by side with the privileged, sharing the burden, because the social institutions that we operate within are designed by and for the privileged in a way that reinforces oppressive hierarchies. I acknowledge that this is extremely demanding, but I believe the demandingness of morality is defensible (Berkey, 2016). If the conditions are grave enough, morality can be that demanding, even for the oppressed. To deny us any responsibility for oppression is to rob us of agency or the opportunity to develop our agency.[16] The responsibility to emancipate ourselves is what the oppressed owe each other, future generations, and, most importantly, ourselves.

The Demandingness of the Duty of Self-Emancipation

This *Duty of the Oppressed* thesis is not novel, as noted above, but it is marginal within contemporary political philosophy. An exception is Daniel Silvermint, who argues in 'Resistance and Wellbeing' that 'victims capable of responsible agency have a moral obligation to resist their own oppression' (2013: 405). Failure on the part of the oppressed to protect or promote their own well-being is viewed as a 'blameworthy failing,' whereby the oppressed become 'partially responsible for their diminished level of well-being' (2013: 424).

Silvermint looks at oppression from the perspective of the oppressed, whom he refers to as 'victims'. He explores their duty to counter their oppression, which he refers to as 'resisting,' and what may ground such a duty. His notion of resistance contemplates not only actual overcoming of the circumstances of oppression, which he refers to as 'external resistance,' but also withstanding oppression, which he refers to as 'internal resistance.'

Silvermint proposes a distinctive justification for the duty of the oppressed to engage in resistance. He argues that resistance 'is a component of [the victim's] objective well-being in oppressive circumstances' specifically in that resistance promotes the self-respect and autonomy of the oppressed (2013: 417). Moreover, on Silvermint's account, beyond any instrumental benefits, resistance is valuable to one's wellbeing and a morally worthwhile life; however, there is often a trade-off between the intrinsic benefits of resistance and the instrumental harms it may lead to.

16 Duff (2018) explores the distinction and connections between two meanings of 'deny' that are in play here – to deny that someone has agency, and to deny them agency in the sense of removing or diminishing it.

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While my account posits a collective duty of the oppressed to overcome oppression, Silvermint assumes an individualistic stance in assessing whether there is a duty to resist. On his account, a victim of oppression is relieved from the duty to resist when, based on personal introspection, the resistance would come at too great a cost to other pursuits, when the victim has reasonable individual estimates of excessive costs of resistance, and/or when the victim suffers from a poor psychological state.

I agree that the costs of resistance may at times be so great as to relieve an oppressed individual of their duty to self-emancipate, and that contextual considerations are key in determining when this is the case. Where I depart from Silvermint is that I do not believe that personal introspection is adequate for this determination. It is not for an individual to simply excuse themselves, where others similarly situated might not – or worse, where too many others might do likewise, thwarting the project of collective self-emancipation.

On the flip side, an individual's introspective assessment of their duties may be unfairly and unrealistically high, perhaps because they have internalized a neoliberal logic of personal responsibility or struggle with guilt and shame from an oppressive religious upbringing. It is important that these assessments too can be challenged, as the hyper self-attribution of duty can cause great suffering as well as problems for movements such as 'super activist' culture and 'burnout' (Proctor, 2024).

By stipulating the duty of the oppressed to overcome their own oppression, my account relies on a conception of morality that is demanding (but not, I hope, punishing). Contrary to Silvermint's conclusion that 'failing to resist does not reliably contribute to continued oppression' (2013: 410) and that 'the harm that non-resisting victims cause other victims… [is] often or almost always excused' (2013: 413), I have highlighted the opposite – that self-emancipation is necessary and that relying on paternalistic emancipation is unlikely to fully alleviate oppression. If we slide towards the *No Duty* view (or reinforce unjust self-blame) by adopting a purely individualist account of the conditions under which resistance is demanded, we will be stuck in oppressive circumstances. As Silvermint points out, there seems to be a 'trade-off between taking the agency of victims seriously and taking the circumstances of oppression seriously' (2013: 406). Given these options, the lesser evil is to take the agency of the oppressed seriously: it is the only realistic path towards moral, political, and social progress.

From Collective to Individual Duty: Three Related Challenges

The discussion so far has been about the collective duty of the oppressed. How

does this collective duty translate into individual duties on the part of oppressed people? I have already noted that the distribution of responsibility can depend on individual circumstances, and in many cases these determinations are far from simple. This is partly because, as Marilyn Frye points out:

> One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind – situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation (Frye, 1983: 2).

This section explores how such damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't scenarios exacerbate one of the central challenges of self-emancipation: namely, the difficulty of achieving sufficient agreement among the oppressed group as to the existence and nature of oppression, and how it is to be overcome. I call this the *problem of consensus*.[17]

Actual and Transcendental Interests

I have so far taken for granted that the oppressed, in contrast with the privileged, have an objective interest in overcoming oppression. However, here are two ways in which people can conceive of objective interests: actual and transcendental.[18] Interests are *actual* when they refer to immediate interests in the here and now. But sometimes people can also conceive of interests in a *transcendental* way, that is, in anticipation of a future that is not guaranteed.

Political activists and oppression theorists who invoke a transcendental conception of interests often make proclamations about how the emancipation of an oppressed group serves to emancipate us all. In 'Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female', Frances Beal argues that it is 'essential for those who understand the workings of capitalism and imperialism to realize that the exploitation of black people and women works to *everyone's disadvantage* [my italics] and that the liberation of these two groups is a stepping-stone to the liberation of all oppressed people in this country and around the world' (2008: 171). Beal is saying that knowledge of how capitalism and imperialism's mechanisms work can serve as a guide for liberation. But whilst it is true that such knowledge can be useful for overcoming oppression, the path to liberation is so much more complex and torturous than this passage might suggest.

When Beal says that 'the exploitation of black people and women works to everyone's disadvantage,' she seems to be invoking a *transcendental* conception

17 'Ch. 6: The Epistemology of Oppression' (Bascara 2020) defends a consensus-based account of the conditions under which claims of oppression are justified.

18 Rather than a strict binary, we might see these as poles of a spectrum.

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of interests. A world where exploitation and imperialism do not exist would arguably be better for everyone: the dehumanizing violence of colonialism also dehumanizes the colonizer; the capitalist too is alienated and controlled by market forces; men suffer from patriarchal gender norms that inhibit genuine intimacy (Fanon, 2004; hooks, 2016; Roberts, 2016). In the actual world, however, exploitation exists and it works for the *advantage* of the exploiters and imperialists. As Finlayson points out, to deny that a dominant group benefits in some sense from the *status quo* (specifically, that they benefit relative to those they subordinate) would be to deny that oppression exists (Finlayson, 2016: 2).

Beal's 'everyone' might more plausibly be read in context as referring to all *oppressed* people. Her use of 'everyone' (as in, those it is relevant to address) indicates the self-emancipatory suppositions of her argument. So, the point is not that Donald Trump and Elon Musk could be better off in some possible world where they had been stripped of their power to dominate and had a lot of therapy. It is that the struggles against race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression demand solidarity and an intersectional analysis to be successful. There is something self-defeating about a white worker supporting racist border policies that enhance the power of their exploiters, a Black man investing in misogyny, thus harming anti-racist struggles, and so on.

Yet the interests invoked here still transcend to some extent the given situation, where the 'wages of whiteness' (Narayan, 2017) and the benefits to men of patriarchal domination are very real. In the current state of things, the interests of the powerful and the oppressed tend to conflict with each other, and there is no easy way to dissolve the contradiction between the different sets of antagonistic interests. These contradictions frequently emerge during self-emancipatory efforts when privileged sections of the oppressed group see an opportunity for assimilation into dominant power structures. Notable examples are affluent white gays embracing 'homonormativity' and 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2007; Stryker, 2008), and the 'national bourgeoisie' who, as Fanon warned, in many countries perpetuated neo-colonial domination after formal independence (Fanon, 2004: Ch. 3).

Even aside from the dynamics generated by intersecting oppressions, there can be systematic tensions between actual and transcendental interests that stymie self-emancipation efforts. Marx and Engels (1978: 474) should not have ended the Communist Manifesto with '[you] have nothing to lose but [your] chains… Working men of all countries, unite!' because in the actual world, workers have jobs to lose and mouths to feed. When workers summon other workers to participate in strike action, they often formulate the demand to join the strike as

being in the interests of the workers they are trying to convince when, in fact, it may not be in the actual existing interest of workers to participate in the strike. If the strike is successful and the demands of the strikers are satisfactorily met, it becomes true that it was in all the workers' interest to participate in the strike. But if the strike fails to achieve its objectives, then, *ex post*, it was not necessarily in the interests of the workers to strike because they forewent their wages.

More generally, if capitalist competition is the norm governing our economic activities, not being exploited is often worse than being exploited because being exploited might at least mean that you have the means to live on. When moral pioneers[19] oppose sweatshops, they must be careful about the potential loss of livelihood of sweatshop workers. Within a certain limited frame, the victims of sweatshop exploitation may accrue benefits from working in them. As Matt Zwolinski argues, 'Exploitation can… be mutually beneficial, where both parties walk away better off than they were *ex ante*. What makes such mutually beneficial interactions nevertheless exploitative is that they are, in some way, unfair' (Zwolinski and Wertheimer, 2017).

Michael Neu is right to critique the 'analytical atomism' of arguments like Zwolinski's, which reproduce and legitimize liberal violence by presenting the existing set-up as a natural given, sidelining analysis of its historical, power-saturated origins and refusing to imagine that it could ever be transcended through collective action (Duff, 2024; Neu, 2017). Nonetheless, it remains the case that self-emancipatory projects must often confront limited option sets in which the immediate and individual interests of the oppressed (to survive or benefit within the *status quo*) are in tension with their transcendental and collective interests in emancipation.

Abnormal and Perverse Moral Contexts

Marxists are perhaps the most known for their dogged optimism about overcoming oppression – because Marxist philosophy appears to have a formula for how to bring about the end of capitalism (even if only some readings see that end as inevitable). They are not the only ones, though, who can fail to take seriously the moral and political damage that fighting oppression involves. Many non-Marxist feminists fall into this trap too. Perhaps in their desire to overcome oppression and in their efforts to exhort others to join their causes, activists tend to downplay the sacrifices required to escape oppressive states of affairs.

19 ' The concept of the moral pioneer might be argued to contain a paternalistic narrative of emancipation sedimented within it, insofar as 'pioneer' has inescapably colonial (or, in some contexts, state socialist) resonances.

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In 'Responsibility and Reproach' (1989), Cheshire Calhoun problematizes the process by which we can improve conditions of oppression with the notions of moral ignorance and abnormal moral contexts. She considers 'how… we [can] locate individual responsibility when oppression occurs at the level of social practice' (1989: 391). According to Calhoun, there are two kinds of moral contexts: normal and abnormal. In normal moral contexts, 'the rightness or wrongness of different courses of action is "transparent" to individuals, where "transparent" does not mean self-evident, but simply that participants in normal moral contexts share a common moral language, agree for the most part on moral rules, and use similar methods of moral reasoning' (1989: 384).

In contrast, 'abnormal moral contexts arise at the frontiers of moral knowledge when a subgroup of society (for instance, bioethicists or business ethicists) makes advances in moral knowledge faster than they can be disseminated to and assimilated by the general public and subgroups at specific moral risk (e.g., physicians and corporate executives.)' (1989: 396). While Calhoun here presents a privileged-first narrative, with moral knowledge apparently stemming from professional ethicists, we do not need to assume this. Drawing on the resources of standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1998; Hill Collins, 2000), we can suppose that oppressed individuals and collectives – due to their epistemically privileged social location – are more likely to see through the legitimating forces that maintain their plight, and thus to face abnormal moral contexts.

Calhoun is worried that ignorance can be exculpating, because it poses a challenge for the project of assigning responsibility. Calhoun then argues that even if ignorance is exculpating, we can still reproach people because that is the way we normalize an abnormal moral context and improve conditions of oppression. She talks about an ordinary man who 'always refers to women as "girls" or "ladies"' and how he 'ought not be blamed for linguistically infantilizing or patronizing women' (1989: 398). Calhoun is convinced that what the person is doing is wrong, but that given social norms the person is not culpable for the wrong. The way to normalize abnormal moral contexts is through reproaching individuals for their non-culpable moral wrongs because such reproach will rob them of an exculpating reason. Moral ignorance can make one open to reproach.

A limitation of Calhoun's analysis is that she has chosen a social practice that, while harmful, is only mildly so. Sexist language of this kind is certainly connected with, and might be said to subtly maintain or legitimize, forms of patriarchal power that are overtly violent and even deadly – but it is still a microaggression with emphasis on the micro. Crucially, the likely consequences of challenging it are not especially severe, at least for women (or men) who

are relatively privileged in other ways. This can make it appear as though normalization of the abnormal moral context is a straightforward process.

The very term 'abnormal' can subtly promote a view where such widespread moral ignorance exists only in exceptional cases. Critical theorists of ideology would point out that a feature of persistent subordination precisely tends to be its legitimization within dominant discourses, making scenarios of widespread failures to recognize the injustice or harmfulness of an oppressive practice more the norm than the exception (Finlayson, 2016: 3; Mills, 2005).

If we repeat Calhoun's analysis for more severe cases, we see that responsibility for unjust social practices can be extremely problematic. Consider those practices of genital cutting sometimes known as female genital mutilation (FGM).[20] In some African countries, the percentage of women and girls who undergo harmful cutting procedures is still staggeringly high: 99% in Somalia, 95% in Guinea, 90% in Djibouti, 89% in Mali, and 87% in Egypt (UNICEF, n.d.). There are significant problems with how white Western feminists have addressed this issue – unsurprisingly given the problems of paternalistic emancipation already highlighted. The term 'FGM' itself is contentious and anti-FGM discourses and policies have been rightly criticized for reinforcing racism and compounding harm, for example through legitimizing the hyper-policing of racially oppressed communities (Ahmadu et al., 2025; Finlayson, 2019; Pantazis et al., 2025). Nonetheless, as an advocate of self-emancipation I cannot ignore these kinds of cases, especially affecting the poor in the Global South, where acute harms and intersecting oppressions generate high-stakes double binds for the oppressed.

Calhoun understands abnormal moral contexts to be scenarios wherein there is still a clear right or wrong action, but the rightness or wrongness of the action is not transparent to most people. This can work for cases where there seem to be no grave social costs imposed. When all that needs to be done is to call out bad language, the cost on the moral pioneer may not be very serious. In many scenarios, the worst thing likely to happen to a feminist correcting sexist language is being deemed a killjoy and viewed as a confrontational person. Women do receive rape and death threats for criticizing patriarchal speech, particularly online, and vulnerability to backlash can be compounded for those oppressed along multiple axes; for instance, they may face transmisogynist

20 'Though I do not occupy the most appropriate standpoint to theorize about FGM, I come from a culture that practices male child circumcision. There are important similarities between genital cutting in African contexts and the practice in the Philippines, so I believe I do have some relevant cultural background that equips me to study this practice. Of course, there are also differences. For instance, while a procedure carried out on children assigned male at birth impacts those who are relatively powerless due to age, it cannot be said to stem from or contribute to a broader subordination of their gender class.

abuse or controlling images like the Angry Black Woman or the Man-Hating Lesbian (12 Rules For What, 2021; Collins, 2000; Faye, 2026; Moerking, 2025). Yet even if our feminist suffers social penalties and isolation in some contexts, there will likely still be the option to befriend other feminists who share her views.[21] This makes standing up to sexist language in many cases the right thing to do.

But for harmful social practices that are deeply entrenched such that social penalties for challenging them are severe, and may fall on others as well as oneself, it is unclear that there is an unequivocal correct course of action available. So, in addition to abnormal and normal moral contexts, I argue that we can also have situations of *perverse moral contexts*, where there is no obviously right or wrong course of action. Imagine you are a mother in Somalia, where 99% of children assigned female at birth undergo FGM. You come across a pamphlet by the World Health Organization or UNICEF about how FGM is a human rights violation. Though most people do not change their minds when presented with new evidence,[22] you become convinced that FGM is wrong and decide that you will not subject your daughter to the harmful practice. In Somalia, FGM is performed on girls between the age of four and eleven. So, when your twelve-year-old daughter comes home asking you why you did not have FGM performed on her, you are ready to show her the pamphlet that convinced you that FGM is wrong.

Unfortunately, your child does not care about the pamphlet. What she cares about is the fact that she is the only girl in her school who has not had FGM. She is ridiculed by her peers for being unclean. She is called names and suffers insults. When other girls share stories of their bravery and resilience after the operation, your daughter is bitterly silent and is angry that her mother has stopped her from participating. She wants to feel normal and be accepted by her peers, but the people in her community regard her as a social deviant. As the WHO is clearly aware, 'the social pressure to conform to what others do and have been doing, as well as the need to be accepted socially and the fear of being rejected by the community, are strong motivations to perpetuate the practice. In some communities, FGM is almost universally performed and unquestioned' (WHO, n.d.).

In Calhoun's scenario of sexist language, there is clearly a right course of

21 For a feminist 'Killjoy Survival Kit,' see Conclusion 1 of Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017). In those situations where the danger of calling out sexist language is more extreme, what I go on to say about *perverse moral contexts* may apply.

22 A phenomenon discussed in Kolbert (2017).

action (i.e., reproach) despite pervasive moral ignorance. Here, however, both two available options that the mother faces involve a wrong. She believes that FGM is a human rights violation, so she does not want it for her child. But she also sees how much her daughter is suffering because her mother is a moral pioneer in their community. So, in perverse moral contexts, the right action may not only be not transparent to the general population (as it is in Calhoun's abnormal moral contexts); our confidence in our ideas about what is right or wrong can disappear altogether. Given that FGM is widely practiced in their society, whatever the mother does will harm her child.

The only way that the mother in this scenario can escape this dilemma is to move to a country where FGM is not practiced. However, this option is unavailable to most of the Somalian population as 67% experience multidimensional poverty, with this rising to 74.3% in rural areas and 81.5% among nomadic populations (UNDP Somalia, 2025). Significant financial resources are required to leave an impoverished country, so this way out of participating in an unjust social practice is probably not available even to their middle class. It can only be an option for the handful members of Somalia's economic elite. In any case, even if the mother in our scenario saves up enough money to buy plane tickets for her and her daughter to go to, for example, the UK, she would be unable to leave Somalia because, without some form of external sponsorship, it is practically impossible for a poor person from the 'Third World' to acquire a visa (even a tourist visa) to a rich country.[23] In short, she may be in a double bind from which there is no (individual) way out.

Oppression as a Prisoner's Dilemma

Perverse moral contexts might be understood as generating co-ordination problems of the kind dramatized in the prisoner's dilemma (Kuhn, 2019). In this story, Prisoner A's individual interests are set in competition with Prisoner B's even while both would ultimately benefit more from co-operation. Not knowing about how Prisoner B will behave, Prisoner A forms the belief that the best course of action for her is to rat out Prisoner B. If Prisoner B rats her out, at least she did the same thing, so they both suffer the penalties of their non-cooperation with each other. If Prisoner B does not rat her out, she walks free albeit with the moral taint that she has betrayed her fellow-prisoner.

In both cases, Prisoner A is thinking about what is best for her as an *individual* since she does not know how Prisoner B will act. Without certainty and assurance

23 'This is why Noa Nogradbi (2016), in 'Should She Be Granted Asylum?', argues that gender should be included as a basis for asylum.

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of loyalty and cooperation between the prisoners, they are in a damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't situation: from either prisoner's perspective, the two options are bad. If she rats him out, her friend will be imprisoned, and she will have played a role in his incarceration. If she does not rat him out, she could be imprisoned by her friend. Both choices have bad consequences from an individual's perspective. The Prisoner's Dilemma, like some situations of oppression, activates individualistic and antagonistic reasoning among the oppressed.[24]

But if Prisoner A trusts Prisoner B, she will have access to a possible scenario that is non-extant in the scenario above. If there is trust and loyalty among the prisoners, collective intentionality is activated. Collective intentionality is the ability of individuals to form 'collective intentions in planning and acting' (Searle, 2010: 43). If Prisoner A believes that Prisoner B is loyal and trustworthy, she can form the belief that 'Prisoner B is trustworthy and loyal, so he will not rat me out.' Such a belief can cause her to form a collective intentional state of the form 'We will get out of here.' The collective intentional state that is formed in her mind produces an individual prescription on how she ought to behave for her collective desire – that they both get out – to be fulfilled. By modifying her individualistic intentional state to a collective intentional state, she forms the belief that she ought to stay silent if her desire has a chance of getting satisfied.

The same is true for some cases of oppression. If there is consensus among the oppressed to stop participating in their oppression, we can escape oppressive situations. Unfortunately, when injustice occurs at the level of social practice, it is sometimes difficult to even see that there is a wrong to begin with. When a wrong is identified, it can be very costly to be a moral pioneer. In fact, the status of being a moral pioneer is largely contingent upon how things turn out.[25] The suffragettes, militant activists that demanded women's right to vote in Britain, were criminals. They were seen as threats to the social order, and rightly so. They were moral pioneers of their time, but the recognition of them as moral pioneers came many years later.

In this sense, the individual duty of the oppressed to overcome oppression and self-emancipate is dependent on the context; it is grounded in actual interests

24 'While Finlayson (2014) warns against reducing all difficulties of coordinating resistance among the oppressed to game-theoretic scenarios, the prisoner's dilemma set-up does capture a particular species of problem I'm concerned with here.

25 'See the discussion of *proleptic* uses of the language of oppression, 'where the initially unjustified claim of oppression functioned to enlighten, educate, and achieve consensus among insiders of the practice', becoming justified in hindsight' (Bascara 2020, 176-180).

and faces the challenges of the prisoner's dilemma arising out of perverse moral contexts. One thing this analysis brings into focus is how fundamental *relationships* are to the project of self-emancipation. While collective action is essential to transforming perverse moral contexts, the abstract invocation of transcendental interests may be inadequate to generate the conditions for that action when we are set against each other in the here and now. Faced with oppression's double binds, we need real bonds of mutual care and trust – what some call revolutionary love (James, 2022) – to pull each other through.

Overcoming Oppression Through Self-Emancipation

The content of the duty of the oppressed is to engage in a process of self-emancipation. In this final section, I will modify Jamieson's four-step process by drawing on a Marxist account of overcoming oppression. The oppressed need to develop a group consciousness, akin to the Marxist notion of class consciousness, and then take the necessary action to overthrow or at least improve the conditions of existing injustice.

The Process of Self-Emancipation

The first step to overcoming oppression is diagnosis. Here, Jamieson's analysis seems right: there must be a recognition of injustice and the practice of subordination. One way to achieve this is to identify a moral or political issue that affects a group of people. Issues can be as minor as dress code – for instance, when women in the Philippines protested and won a legal battle against companies that required women to wear high heels to work (Yi, 2017). Issues can be as major and as comprehensive as a demand for a change in government or the abolition of dominant institutions. The Communist Party of the Philippines is a Maoist organization that seeks to overthrow the existing capitalist mode of production through armed rebellion because they deem the existing system oppressive and unjust (Kistler, 2019). The crucial thing is that there needs to be consensus among at least a significant sub-set of the relevant group that they are victims of an injustice.[26] They need to identify a particular issue that they collectively deem to be unjust and name it as such.[27]

Returning to Jamieson's four-step solution to oppression, I must reject his second step – paternalistic defense of the oppressed – and instead draw from Marxist theory the idea of collective self-emancipation. For Marxists, the

26 Complexities around how to determine the relevant group in each case, and where there is scope for including hypothetical consensus that might be achieved under improved circumstances, are addressed in Bascara (2020: Ch. 6).

27 'Perhaps proleptically in the first instance.

oppression of the proletariat can only be overcome through the proletariat's collective effort (Draper, 1971). Proletarians and others marginalized along lines of gender, race, sexuality, nationality, disability, and so on can likewise attain their freedom by forming a collective where they can discuss their issues and figure out what they can and should demand from the rest of society.

Consider, by way of an example, the United Kingdom's domestic worker tied visa. In April 2012, the Conservative government removed the concessions granted to domestic workers coming to the UK with their foreign employers. Under the new visa system, domestic workers 'can be forced to work long hours, are not paid the minimum wage, denied overtime pay or simply not paid at all' (Sloan, 2013). As for many precarious migrant workers, there is no implementation of the rules and regulations claimed to protect workers, while the state's resources are funneled into surveillance and bordering processes that put them at further risk of violence (Dias-Abey et al., 2024; Smith and Mac, 2018: 2). One factor in this exploitative dynamic is a legal loophole I have examined elsewhere, whereby domestic workers can be classified as 'family members' of their employers (Bascara, 2016b).

Domestic workers formed various self-help organizations, like The Voice of Domestic Workers and the Filipino Domestic Workers Association (Karpf, 2019). They came together because they believed that the tied visa was unjust and have been working to raise awareness in British society about the harms they are subjected to. They have achieved consensus amongst themselves and formed a united collective to campaign against the tied visa. We can confidently say that they are making a justified claim of oppression, given that there are no other domestic workers in the UK contesting or protesting against their campaign.[28] It is through their shared experiences, deliberation, and solidarity that they are able to garner support from charities and secure media exposure.

The penultimate step to overcoming oppression through self-emancipation is for the collective to articulate their demands. In our example, demands included the right to change employers without jeopardizing one's immigration status. The methods of articulating and advancing those demands are outside the scope of my project here, and even amongst Marxists views range from 'propaganda and the practical carrying out of their social plans' (Marx and Engels, 1978: 498) to revolutionary action. They might include joining humanitarian institutions

28 This consideration relates to the epistemology of oppression developed in Bascara (2020: Ch. 6). In favor of its relevance, we might consider the phenomenon of economically powerful actors 'astro-turfing' counter-protests against anti-oppressive movements. This speaks to the way that the appearance of disagreement among a (putatively) oppressed group can effectively unsettle judgements of oppression.

and activist groups, carrying out direct action, organizing communal childcare and eldercare, writing radical texts, doing court support for arrestees, or leading revolutionary guerilla armies (see, for instance, Delmas, 2018; Mars et al., 2025; Rossdale, 2019; Shah, 2018). While the aptness of any approach or action will depend on the circumstances, it is important to remember that demands need not, and often will not, take forms that are straightforwardly legible to those in power and within dominant discourses (Duff and Hall, 2025). Equally, we must recognize that demands – along with political analysis of the power relations they respond to – are often developed precisely through collective struggles, rather than formulated in advance (Rossdale, 2021).

The final step is, of course, the achievement of the demands of the oppressed. Issues that can be articulated with significant precision have a greater chance of resolution, whereas attempts at overarching overhauls of unjust systems are often unattainable without protracted, resolute, and coercive measures. Karl Popper's distinction between piecemeal and utopian social engineering is useful here (2011: 9). One could believe that the practice of having domestic workers is unjust and must therefore be abolished, likewise the existence of border regimes – these would be characterized as utopian projects. But if we can home in on a specific issue, like the domestic worker's tied visa, then we are engaged in piecemeal social engineering that has a better chance at success in the short to medium term. Maintaining a utopian horizon may still be important, however, to avoid the Pyrrhic victories of formal emancipation that can be granted within, and serve to reaffirm, the *status quo*.

In summary, the duty of the oppressed is to engage in a process of self-emancipation by developing a group consciousness, forming a collective, then taking the necessary action to overcome the oppression. While not all members of the oppressed group may understand their situation as oppressive, there will in practice always be some who do. Those that have the consciousness and knowledge have the duty to overcome oppression. They are tasked, firstly, with educating others who are in their social location. According to the standpoint view of epistemic privilege, it is the oppressed who are more likely to have special insight into their oppression. The greater the proportion of people in the group who have the knowledge, the less demanding the duty is on everyone. Those that have the requisite knowledge thus have an interest in raising the consciousness of everybody else. In this respect, Calhoun's example of spreading feminist consciousness by correcting sexist language is apt. Such interventions are addressed as much to one's fellow-oppressed as to the privileged; they serve not only to shift our sense of what is right, but to shift the reality of what is possible.

An Objection: Fostering Divisions

I have conceptualized oppression in terms of two groups who have conflicting interests, arguing that the oppressed have a duty to self-emancipate. What Young says of the philosopher is true of everyone: '[t]he philosopher is always socially situated, and if the society is divided by oppressions, she either reinforces or struggles against them' (1990: 5). Someone could object to my account by saying that it advocates divisiveness. Instead of encouraging everyone to address a common goal as a united collective, I am emphasizing difference and sectarianism. How could the path to moral progress and emancipation further entrench difference?

To answer this, we should return to Marx. We cannot go straight from capitalism to communism, on his account; an interim stage of socialism is necessary.[29] We now also know (too well) that we cannot go from centuries of gender and racial subordination to gender and racial equality by merely changing the letter of the law. As Carol Hau argues, 'pedagogy cannot operate without any hierarchizing since the gap between imagining and actualizing unity among the people cannot be wished away without a program of struggle' (Hau, 2000: 139). Emancipation is a protracted process. Foregrounding difference is helpful for identifying the benefits and privileges of the powerful. As Young argues, '[t]he impulse to community often coincides with a desire to preserve identity and in practice excludes others who threaten that sense of identity' (1990: 12).

We cannot simply wish away the fact that the interests of the privileged and the interests of the oppressed are in conflict. Prior to the recognition of marital rape, husbands had the *de jure* 'freedom' to rape their wives.[30] The notion of marital rape is designed to curtail that 'freedom', and in this sense goes against the interests of men who desire to control their partners – of whom there are still many. For the privileged, equality may feel like oppression. Emphasizing structural disadvantage involves demonstrating that there are competing interests between hierarchically situated social groups. The social construction of categories of race and gender produces what Jenkins calls 'ontic injustice': women and gender non-conforming people are defined as inferior to cis men, at least in most Western constructions of gender (Jenkins, 2016); people racialized as non-white are positioned as inferior to those racialized as white (Mills,

29 While this view is contested by 'communization' strands of Marxism, the broader point stands that revolutionary transformations will involve messy and protracted struggles.

30 Many feminists argue that they still have it *de facto* in many cases. Systematic failures of liberal state institutions to address sexual and gendered violence are explored in Davis et al. (2022), Duff (2018), Duff and Jenkins (2021), and Cowan (2024).

2007). This standoff is unavoidably antagonistic – a problem to which Marx and Engels' notion of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was one response.[31] In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, '[a]ll oppression creates a state of war' (2011: 770).

As in Marxism, my account of emancipation hopes for a brighter future. The antagonistic counter-narrative that will be used for emancipation is, hopefully, not permanent. Although foregrounding the antagonism is necessary, it is only temporary. It is merely an instrument for attaining or at least getting as close as possible to realizing equality. It is not intended as a guide that captures the right universal moral code for how we ought to live together. Elsewhere I have offered a situated defense of compatriot partiality in contexts of (neo-)colonial oppression as not contrary to but necessary for the realization of cosmopolitan commitments to global justice (Bascara, 2016a). Likewise in many other cases of oppression, there are corrective measures that are required to be able to move forward, but the goal we are working towards is still to transcend the situation that requires foregrounding the antagonism. The goal is to address the contradictions and, where possible, dissolve them.

Conclusion

This article has examined the issue of overcoming oppression, beginning with a discussion of the duty to overcome oppression. We considered two competing narratives – one emphasizing the duty of the privileged and paternalistic emancipation, the other arguing for a duty of the oppressed. I outlined the problems with paternalistic emancipation. It was conjectured that part of the reason why women and racial minorities continue to be oppressed in Western societies is because the process of emancipation has been commandeered by the privileged. I argued that the oppressed have, as a collective, a duty to overcome oppression through self-emancipation. I considered an objection to this view: in holding the oppressed responsible for emancipation, I might be additionally burdening the victim. I argued that the ascription of responsibility to the oppressed can be an opportunity to develop their (i.e. our) agency. Furthermore, I clarified that the duty to self-emancipate is not uniformly distributed, and developed a schematic distinction between victims and survivors to make this vivid. In some cases of overwhelming victimization and limited capacity, it may be unfair and unrealistic to expect individuals to bear the costs of resistance.

We moved to a discussion of three interlinked problems concerning how the

31 For a recent interpretation and defense of this concept, see Ypi (2020). Recognizing these antagonisms may also be compatible with other approaches to emancipation, such as anarchism (Graeber, 2009; Rossdale, 2015).

duty of the collective can be made sense of on the ground. First, I analysed the distinction between *actual* and *transcendental* interests, showing how statements about a transcendental future where certain injustices no longer exist can obscure the convoluted and difficult work that is required towards self-emancipation. We then considered Cheshire Calhoun's distinction between *normal* and *abnormal* moral contexts, adding a further category of *perverse* moral contexts. In an abnormal moral context, the right action still exists; in a perverse moral context structured by oppressive double binds, our ideas about what actions are right or wrong disappear altogether. With this distinction in place, I turned to the idea of a prisoner's dilemma as a framework for analysing the challenge of self-emancipation. By exploring how oppression can activate antagonistic individualistic thinking among the oppressed, I argued that it is only through developing forms of collective consciousness or collective intentionality that situations of oppression can be escaped.

Finally, we considered the task of self-emancipation taken up by migrant domestic workers in the UK who formed organizations to articulate their shared demands. We considered another concern with our account of overcoming oppression – that of fostering divisions. Someone might claim that this account of oppression encourages sectarianism and focuses on difference instead of cooperation. I stressed that foregrounding the antagonisms between the oppressed and the relevant privileged group is only a temporary measure but is instrumental for advancing the interests of the oppressed. As Fanon famously argued, sometimes we must go through the particular to get to the universal; a liberation struggle *against* the oppressor is the precondition of a 'new humanity' (2004: 246).[32]

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