

THE KANTIAN DUTY OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF OPPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

Tamara Fakhoury: The Kantian Duty of Self-Improvement in the Context of Oppression
(Under the direction of Thomas E. Hill, Jr.)

Is Kant's duty of natural self-perfection a moral obligation for individuals who suffer the harms of oppression? In this paper I argue that it is. Understood in a Kantian framework, the project of self-improvement is neither impossible nor too onerous a task under oppression. Adopting the end of self-improvement is a requirement of self-respect and an accessible and morally worthy means of resisting one's oppression.

To Beirut, lady of the world.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MM: Metaphysics of Morals

G: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals

1 INTRODUCTION

A life lived loafing in front of the TV is neither happy nor virtuous. Most would agree that there are good reasons to make something of oneself. No matter who we are, we ought to cultivate the skills and powers that allow us to fulfill our goals and to create the life we want to live. When we persistently fail to develop ourselves, there is a strong sense that something valuable has gone to waste. There is a sense in which we are not giving adequate regard to something worthwhile.

We all have that friend, or have ourselves been that friend, who never really tries. A “slacker” in every sense of the word, she is content not developing any of her talents to any degree.¹ She accepts whatever the circumstances make of her abilities. She lacks aspiration, has no desire for progress, and tends to be apathetic and passive about the way her life goes. Preferring to remain comfortable, she regularly ignores opportunities to develop her skills, interests, and talents. We are reluctant to reproach her, as she may be going through a difficult time, she may not be blameworthy. Perhaps she is dealing with adverse circumstances beyond her control. Maybe her passive attitude is a response to social injustices she is suffering. Still, we cannot help but feel she is responsible for some moral fault- not regarding us, her friends, her family, God, or society, but above and apart from all, regarding *herself*. Even if our friend seems perfectly content or even happy in her ways, we believe she is somehow treating herself wrongly. She “*can do better*”, “*is worth more*”, she “*owes it to herself to try*”.

¹ Johnson, “Self-Development as an Imperfect Duty”, p. 30.

The intuitions I've described are very much in line with Immanuel Kant's views. In the *Doctrine of Virtue* of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that a "human being" has an imperfect duty to herself to "develop and increase [her] natural perfection" (MM 6: 444). We owe it to ourselves "not to leave idle... rusting away the natural predispositions and capacities that [our] reason can someday use". The duty is fundamentally a requirement of self-respect.² To respect oneself as a human being with an autonomous will, a person ought to "develop and increase" her rational capacities "as a means to all sorts of possible ends" (MM 6:444-5).

Philosophers disagree over whether there really is a moral obligation to improve oneself. Robert Paul Wolff, dismisses Kant's duties to oneself for being deeply moralistic.³ Others, like Bernard Williams, Ann Cudd, Marcus Singer, and Kurt Baier, dismiss the idea of duties to the self as absurd on the grounds that morality only governs social interactions between individuals and can say nothing about how an agent regards herself.⁴ Like Robert Johnson, Thomas Hill, Lara Denis, Carol Hay and others, I think these worries need not be serious problems for the Kantian. However, I will not participate in that interesting debate here. Instead, in this paper, I assume that Kantian duties to the self are possible and that persons in general owe it to themselves to adopt the end of self-improvement. Given these assumptions, I ask, what are we to say for individuals living in the context of oppression?

Initially, it may seem that circumstances of oppression pose a problem for the Kantian duty of self-improvement. Philosophers who work on oppression describe oppressed persons as individuals who are systemically obstructed, materially and

² Hill, "Imperfect Duties to Oneself", *Kant's Tugendlehre*, 299.

³ Johnson, *Self-Development as an Imperfect Duty*, p. 2.

⁴ Denis, "Kant's Ethics and Duties to Oneself", p. 321.

psychologically, from cultivating their rational capacities. The problem is, how can oppressed individuals be obligated to do something that they are systemically prevented from doing? One initially plausible response to this problem is to argue that since oppression deprives individuals of the means for self-improvement, self-improvement is not an obligation for oppressed individuals at all. Were they to lack developed human capacities, it would be no moral failing.⁵ This paper is a rejection of this kind of response to the problem oppression seems to pose to the Kantian duty of self-improvement.

Against the view that oppressed individuals can commit no moral failing in regard to their self-improvement, I argue that failing to improve one's capacities in the context of oppression, too, is a failure of self-respect and amounts to allowing oneself to be servile. As such, excusing the oppressed from cultivating their abilities is not in their interest or the interest of removing oppression. Making an exception to the duty for the oppressed actually denies them of an essential means of preserving their rational nature, exercising their autonomy, and resisting their oppression. I want to show that, despite the circumstances that demoralize and deprive them of the normal opportunities for self-improvement, oppressed individuals can cultivate themselves and have strong and unique moral reasons for doing so. Namely, by cultivating their capacities they inevitably resist their oppression and enhance the quality of their lives even while suffering its harms.

The final goal of this paper is to make a case for self-improvement as an effective and accessible means of resisting oppression and as the morally good reaction to one's oppression. My way paves a middle path between Stoic *apatheia* in response to one's oppression on the one hand and reckless rebellion on the other. Inspired by the life of

⁵ Johnson, *Self-Improvement: An Essay in Kantian Ethics*, 12. .

Frederick Douglass, I suggest adopting the end of self-improvement as an incremental route towards freedom when other forms of resistance, such as activism, civil disobedience, and opting out of oppressive social norms are not an option.

2 SELF-IMPROVEMENT: WHAT IS IT AND WHY IS IT A DUTY?

In this section I explain Kant's duty of self-improvement. What kind of duty is it? What does it require of us? What are some ways one might fail to fulfill the duty? Why is failing to strive for self-improvement morally wrong? Why is striving for such an end important?

How best to interpret Kant on these issues is tremendously controversial. Kant's discussion in the *Metaphysics of Morals* is short and condensed. Those who are interested in the duty of self-improvement for reasons other than historical interpretation can only take the text as a starting point. Similarly, this section is only a starting point. I will not be able to provide a conclusive or comprehensive account of the duty. Instead, my aim is to get the minimally controversial basics of Kant's view on the table so as to be in a good position to see the problem posed to it by circumstances of oppression.

Let us start by looking at the content of the duty. What is the duty of self-improvement about? What are we being asked to improve? In the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant describes it as a duty "to develop and increase [one's] natural perfection...as a means to all sorts of possible ends" (MM 6:444). A human being "owes it to [herself]...not to leave idle", to surrender her life to comfort "rusting away the natural predispositions and capacities that her reason can some day use" (MM 6:445). We can understand "natural perfection" and "natural predispositions and capacities" as "any capacities whatever for furthering ends set forth by reason" (MM 6:391). Essentially, the obligation is to develop the capacities ("some among them more than others, insofar

as people have different ends” (MM 6:445)) that will help us pursue any plans and goals we might give ourselves throughout the course of our lives. The command can be put this way: “Cultivate your powers of mind and body so they are fit to realize any ends you might encounter, however uncertain you are which of them could sometime become yours” (MM 6:392). Importantly, for Kant, “the capacity to set oneself an end- any end whatsoever- is what characterizes humanity” (MM 6:392). So the requirement to cultivate our capacities is a requirement to “make ourselves worthy of humanity by culture in general” (MM 6:392); it is a requirement to live up to our worth as human beings by working towards the plans and goals we value and that make us who we are.

Kant divides natural capacities into three broad kinds: First are the *powers of spirit*, which include projects like mathematics, logic, philosophy and various other intellectual pursuits. Second are the *powers of soul*, which include creative capacities that involve memory, perception and imagination, such as various arts and practical and interpersonal skills. Third are *powers of body*, which include any physical activities that support bodily health and functions. The distinction between the kinds of capacities is not to be taken too rigidly. Many of the talents and activities we pursue involve elements of all three categories. Moreover, self-improvement is supposed to be a holistic endeavor that continues over the course of life. So, focusing intensely on developing a single capacity and neglecting all others is not a way to fulfill the duty, even if it means achieving greatness in that one capacity. Similarly, developing a number of our capacities only during one phase of our lives is not a way to fulfill the duty either. What is required is regular life-long striving.

Before explaining what the duty requires of us any further, it is important to preemptively squash any potential misunderstandings. A word on what is *not* required by the duty is in order. This is especially important for understanding why oppressed

individuals *can* fulfill the duty, against their limitations: First, we are not obligated to develop every capacity that we have, or even every capacity that we value. While Kant often talks of developing our “talents”, he does not mean that we are obligated to give priority specifically to the capacities we are good at (our “gifts”) or to the activities that lead most effectively to our improvement. Neither does he mean that only individuals with potential for success in some capacity are obligated to cultivate themselves. I can choose to develop my public speaking skills, even though speaking confidently and eloquently in public does not come easily to me, even though my upbringing may have discouraged and barred me from voicing my opinions, and even though, as a result, I rarely feel confidence in doing so. It is not something I have a special knack for, and I will probably never become a great orator. All that is just fine for Kant. It does not count against me if my progress is slow, meager and contrary to my natural abilities.

Moreover, I am still under the obligation to cultivate my capacities even if there is nothing that I am particularly gifted at.

Moreover, we are not obligated to develop our talents all the time, every time we have the opportunity, or whenever we are not fulfilling some other duty.⁶ And of course, it is still permissible to loaf when appropriate (you are still free to decompress by watching bad TV!). Contrary to these common worries about the view, voiced by many including Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf, Lara Denis has argued that Kant’s duty of self-improvement does not necessarily make an agent liable to fanatically obsessing over her own development and moral purity, to feeling that she should be doing something obligatory at all times, or to living in constant psychological tension and

⁶ Johnson, *Self-Improvement: An Essay in Kantian Ethics*, p. 14-42.

conflict with her desires.⁷ This is in part supported by the fact that the duty of self-improvement is not an obligation to take self-perfection as our sole and primary motive when enjoying certain activities, it is not an obligation to obsessively worry about our perfection, to *be perfect*, get as close as humanly possible to an ideal of perfection, or to *maximize* our self-improvement. On the contrary, Kant makes it clear that we are not obligated to invest all or even most of our time working on our talents. As human beings we are limited in time, ability and energy and we have other overriding needs and responsibilities to attend to. Against the common impression, Kant's position on self-development is very accommodating in this regard.

For instance, Kant makes it explicit that the capacities we cultivate need not be directly related to our *moral* perfection (which we have a separate duty to ourselves to cultivate). So, Kant's argument is not that we ought to cultivate our capacities for the sake of becoming morally better persons, or to be better at doing our other duties. I can choose to cultivate my culinary talents and knack for Tae Kwon Do, even though my ability to cook and break boards will not make me a morally better person and I will never use those capacities for any directly moral purpose.⁸ My investment in these activities for their own sake is sufficient. Hence, it is wrong to assume, as many do, that Kant took every action to be a matter of duty, or that Kantian agents are excessively preoccupied with their moral purity and perfection. In fact Kant called this kind of view

⁷ Denis, "Kant's Ethics and Duties to Oneself", p. 338- 343.

⁸As Kant says in the *Groundwork*, even though willing to neglect our capacities and devoting our lives to comfort passes the test of the first formulation of the categorical imperative (i.e. the maxim is universalizable without contradiction) it would be irrational for any human being to will that none of their capacities be developed, since our capacities serve us in all kinds of ways (body, soul, and spirit). Of most interest to me is the fact that willing to neglect our capacities is a sign of diminished self-respect. That is, it fails to satisfy the second formulation of the categorical imperative.

“fantastic virtue”, and thought it was a deeply misguided conception of morality.⁹ As Johnson clarifies, “Kant’s position...goes well beyond valuing natural talents merely as instrumental for, or constitutive of, morally good character or the performance of one’s moral duties. [For instance, the third of the] famous four examples in the *Groundwork*...is of a duty to develop talents with no obvious connection to moral ends, and in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant argues quite explicitly for a duty of natural perfection regardless of its role in moral perfection”.¹⁰

The duty of self-improvement requires us to cultivate each kind of capacity (soul, spirit, body) in whatever way and to whatever extent that is suitable to us given our subjective circumstances (i.e. our time restrictions, natural abilities, relationships with others, social class, economic status, race, culture, genetics, dispositions, etc.) and the kind of person we want to be- the sort of life we value and desire to live. So, if I value running and set a goal to improve my running skills, what I ought to do is train regularly and consistently challenge myself in my training. I may not be able to train every day, and I may not ever be able to run very fast, and I may find running extremely difficult, but none of that counts against fulfilling the duty. What is required is that I set the goal and take reasonable measures towards achieving it, without compromising my wellbeing and my obligations to others. Kant took sincere striving to be necessary and sufficient to fulfill the duty, regardless of the output of the striving; “to strive with all one’s might...is the sufficient incentive of every action conforming to duty” (MM 6:393).

⁹ “[T]hat human being can be called fantastically virtuous who allows *nothing to be morally indifferent*... and strews his steps with duties, as with man-traps; it is not indifferent to him whether I eat meat or fish, drink beer or wine, supposing that both agree with me. Fantastic virtue is a concern with petty details which, were it admitted into the doctrine of virtue, would turn the government of virtue into a tyranny” (MM 4:409). Also see Denis, “Kant’s Ethics and Duties to Oneself”, p. 339.

¹⁰ Johnson, “Self-Development as an Imperfect Duty”, p. 3; G 4:423.

It follows that there are various ways to successfully fulfill the obligation of self-development. A lot of how we go about doing that Kant leaves up to us. To many readers, this might seem too general a requirement to be duty-like in any way. So, how does this work?

In Kant's taxonomy of duties, self-improvement is classified as a "*wide and imperfect*" ethical duty to oneself.¹¹ As a "wide and imperfect" duty, it "determines nothing about the kind and extent of actions themselves but allows latitude for free choice" about what particular talents, abilities, relationships and interests to develop, when to develop them, and to what extent (MM 6:446).¹²

We can think of imperfect duties in contrast to perfect duties: imperfect duties do not prescribe or forbid particular actions at particular times as perfect duties do. Note that an 'imperfect' duty is not to be understood as inferior or less binding than a perfect duty.¹³ It is just as important to strive for self-development as it is to respect the humanity in others. However, perfect duties have priority over imperfect ones; they are overriding and draw the limits for what actions are morally permissible. This means that I am not permitted to seek self-improvement by harming myself, deceiving, disrespecting or manipulating others, regardless of the outcome. Hence, producing great works of art at the cost of abandoning one's family, as in the case of the painter Gauguin in the famous paper by Bernard Williams, does not count towards fulfilling the duty, even if it means the greatest of cultural treasures will come to fruition.

Like other ethical duties pertaining to the "doctrine of ends" (i.e. *The Doctrine of Virtue*), the duty of self-improvement is a duty to adopt self-development as an

¹¹ G 4:421-23; MM 6:445-46

¹²Johnson, "Self-Development as an Imperfect Duty to Oneself", p.6.

¹³ Johnson, *Self-Improvement: An Essay in Kantian Ethics*, p. 17.

obligatory end- a policy, principle, aim, maxim or guiding rational for action. Kant calls it an “end that is also a duty” (MM 6:392). I have successfully adopted the end of self-improvement when I genuinely think of myself as someone with capacities, talents, and interests worth cultivating and when that self-regarding attitude is appropriately reflected in my plans and actions.¹⁴ Thus, adopting the end entails having certain attitudes and dispositions for action (though, it does not count against me if I am never successful in action due to external constraints).

A distinguishing feature of the duties to oneself is that they are not owed to anyone but one’s self. When I fail to fulfill a duty I owe someone else, for instance by cheating them in a business deal, the person I cheat has a right to protest against me and perhaps to seek compensation for my acts. However, I do not owe it to anyone but myself to cultivate my talents, capacities and interests. So, it is no one’s business to take a moral (let alone moralistic) interest in my self-development. My friends and family can motivate and encourage me and set up favorable conditions for my development, but no one is responsible for my improvement, and no one can reproach me, blame me, or impose sanctions on me when I do not develop my capacities. I am the only person with the right to complain or pass judgment on how I treat myself in regards to my development.¹⁵ As Kant says, self-improvement is “something that only the other himself can do” (MM 6:386.). Others may feel upset or disappointed when I do not cultivate myself, but I cannot wrong anyone but myself in this regard. Not only is self-development not owed to anyone but oneself, but Kant also stresses that it is not something we should aspire to only in so far as it enables us to fulfill our obligations to

¹⁴ Hill, “Imperfect Duties to Oneself”, *Kant’s Tugendlehre*, p. 297.

¹⁵ Hill, “Imperfect Duties to Oneself”, *Kant’s Tugendlehre*, p. 297.

others. "Self-improvement is a requirement of self-respect, not just prudence or service to others".¹⁶

For Kant, all ethical duties are grounded in, or gain their authority from and are meant to preserve and uplift the value of human dignity. In Kant's words, they have their source in the fact that humanity in each person is an end in itself (the Humanity Formula).¹⁷ As an ethical duty owed to oneself, self-improvement is grounded in the humanity *in one's own person*. It is an obligation to treat one's own person with respect in regards to one's ends and capacities. So cultivating our capacities is an important method of valuing and respecting one's relationship with oneself. It is a requirement of self-respect and self-esteem. That is fundamentally what makes it so important to thinking about cases of oppression.

As I hope to show in the sections to follow, the Kantian conception of self-improvement is especially important when thinking about cases of oppression because it is a requirement of self-respect and essential to an agent's understanding of herself as a worthy human being capable of autonomous action. Self-respecting agents are agents that set themselves ends and cultivate capacities and skills that will help them to reach those goals. Doing so enhances their positive self-regard and their ability to act autonomously. As such, the duty of self-improvement is a pillar supporting autonomous action. If I do not regard myself as having capacities worth cultivating, I lack an adequate sense of self-worth and I will be unlikely to act on ends that I set for myself. I will be more likely to be servile, passive, to lack self-trust and to defer to the expectations of others, never to form my own plans, cultivating the capacities and ends

¹⁶ Hill, "Imperfect Duties to Oneself", *Kant's Tugendlehre*, p. 299.

¹⁷ Johnson has an interesting discussion about whether the duty can be grounded in the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative alone as Kant seems to suggest it can. Johnson concludes that it cannot and that the second formulation is necessary to ground the duty.

that my family, religion, or society set for me, even when they do not actually promote my autonomy and wellbeing. If this happens regularly over time, if for whatever reason (perhaps due to oppressive circumstances) I am *unable* to regard myself as having capacities worth cultivating independently of their benefitting others, there is a strong sense in which I become passive and servile to my circumstances, instead of active and creative in my striving to bring about my autonomous goals. My inability to strive for improvement is a sign that my autonomy is impaired or at least that it is not being exercised.¹⁸

¹⁸ Moreover, I think this duty is important because as Carol Hay argues, certain forms of oppression, such as gendered self-sacrifice, cannot be understood to be wrong without an account of duties to oneself as the basis for self-respect. Kant's ethics is unique in that it gives self-regarding duties a central role. Other ethical theories, such as care ethics, may not be able to give an adequate account of why gendered self-sacrifice is wrong when it does not compromise the wellbeing of others and our ability to care for them in any obvious way.

3 THE NATURE OF OPPRESSION

Defining Oppression

Oppression is an attempt to obstruct or prevent a person's self-improvement. Ages before talk of oppression became fashionable, J.S Mill certainly seems to have this in mind. In his foundational essay *The Subjection of Women*, Mill states, "the legal subordination of one sex to the other...is wrong in itself, and... one of the chief hindrances to human improvement".¹⁹ On one interpretation of Mill's view, what we today would call oppression is fundamentally the denial of equal liberty to develop one's rational capacities for thought and action.²⁰

Expanding on Mill's foundation, Hay, Cudd, and Frye have a similar understanding of oppression. They describe oppressed persons as individuals who are institutionally denied the liberty and opportunities to cultivate their rational capacities in virtue of their membership in a group of low social esteem. The examples of oppressed persons that most easily come to mind are women, African Americans, people of color and other minority and ethnic groups. I also include some non-traditional candidates of oppression: the impoverished, the physically disabled, the LBTGQ community, and individuals living in societies where there is war or severe political corruption. In many cases, these persons suffer the same kinds of group-specific limitations on their self-improvement as traditional subjects of race or gender

¹⁹ Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 125; Hay, *Kantianism Liberalism, Feminism: Resisting Oppression*, 2.

²⁰ Hay, *Kantianism Liberalism, Feminism: Resisting Oppression*, 2.

based oppression do. In any case, what all oppressed people have in common is that they suffer unjust, group-specific harm. The harms of oppression are imposed systemically (by institutions), through psychological and intellectual inhibitions as well as material limitations on resources and opportunities for self-improvement.

Cudd puts it this way. Oppression is “an institutionally structured harm perpetrated on groups by other groups using direct and indirect material and psychological forces that violate justice...These forces work in part by coercing the oppressed to act in ways that further their own oppression”.²¹ Oppression is necessarily a social injustice imposed by social groups on other social groups. However, it plays out in individuals.²² So, while social groups are the subjects of oppression, “it is fundamentally the individuals in those groups who suffer...though they can only do so as members of social groups”.²³

One basic feature of oppression is that it tends to involve some kind of imposition or coercion, although in some cases, Cudd argues, one can enter into an oppressive relationship by choice. In most cases oppression is unavoidable because you are born into it. Its harms are imposed on you for being who you are- for having a group identity that you cannot easily deny, such as your gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, physical ability, economic status, or race.

Oppression is self-perpetuating. In other words, the subjects of oppression often feel compelled to play along with their oppression. Oppressed persons appear to consent to their subordination, even coming to identify with it, and desiring it to continue. This is because oppression works in part by creating incentives for oppressed

²¹ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 26.

²² Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 22.

²³ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 23.

persons to have false beliefs about themselves, their abilities, and their status in society and in relation to others. Oppressed persons tend to believe that their exploitation is valuable and good, even commanded by god or essential for social cohesion or tradition. Oppressed persons tend to interpret their experiences of being subordinated as natural and deserved. As a result, oppressed persons are socialized to treat themselves and other members of their social group as having less credibility, power, potential and respect-worthiness than members of privileged groups. In addition having less freedom, rights and opportunities as privileged individuals, the oppressed are likely to be more inhibited in their social interactions. It is a mark of their oppression that they tend to be excessively self-doubtful, anxious, hesitant and fearful. They expect to be misunderstood, chastised, distrusted and ignored by others and are more likely to see that kind of treatment as deserved or appropriate- as somehow caused or provoked by them and their inadequacies. As a result, oppressed persons tend to lack self-trust. They tend to be guarded, reticent, self-censoring and self-deprecating. The hallmark of oppression is that it literally turns the individual against herself. She becomes her own oppressor.

Following Cudd and Frye, Hay concisely summarizes oppression as involving the following four “individually necessary and jointly sufficient” conditions for oppression.²⁴

An individual is subject to oppression if:

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

²⁴ Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, Feminism: Resisting Oppression*, 6.

2. On balance, members of G have a relative lack of social esteem, power or authority; and,
3. On balance, members of another group, G*, benefit from her being harmed, and,
4. This harm is unfair, unearned, or illegitimate in some other way.²⁵

Hay's conditions, above, closely correspond to Cudd's conditions for oppression:

1. *The harm condition:* There is a harm that comes out of an institutional practice.
2. *The social group condition:* The harm is perpetuated through a social institution or practice on a social group whose identity exists apart from the oppressive harm in 1.
3. *The privilege condition:* There is another social group that benefits from the institutional practice in 1.
4. *The coercion condition:* There is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm.

Notice that Hay replaces Cudd's coercion condition with a weaker claim that leaves more room for moral responsibility for the oppressed person. It is generally agreed that if an unjust social harm is forced upon me, I am not responsible for it and cannot stop it. But if the harm I suffer is "unfair, unearned or illegitimate", while it still could be forced upon me, it does not have to be. Moreover, I could still be guilty for being passive or for playing into the harm and I could still have an obligation to myself to resist it. Cudd, on the other hand, is a contractarian. She holds that while it is good for the oppressed to try to do something about their oppression and to try to cultivate their

²⁵ Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, Feminism: Resisting Oppression*, 4.

capacities, they do not owe it to themselves to do so. Resistance and self-improvement, for Cudd, can only be an obligation owed to other oppressed persons.

On the other hand Hay, as I do, maintains that oppressed persons first and foremost owe it to themselves to do something about their oppression. However, while both Hay and Cudd focus directly on the obligation to resist oppression, I identify a specific and subtle kind of resistance. That is, resistance through self-improvement. Self-improvement is an obligation whether or not your circumstances fulfill all four conditions of oppression. It is, generally speaking, someone you owe yourself regardless of your circumstances (so long as you possess rational capacities). However, in the context of oppression, self-improvement inevitably takes the form of resistance. This is because, as I have defined it, oppression is fundamentally an effort to inhibit and manipulate certain people away from self-improvement. So, when these people cultivate their human capacities, even if they never actualize their potentials, even if they are never successful, they are still resisting merely by adopting the end. While self-improvement is not enough to fight oppression, and may not seem like resistance at all to the oppressed person who adopts it as an end, it is still effective and accessible as a way for oppressed individuals to do something about their circumstances. It is the means to make something better out of life under oppression. By cultivating their human capacities they preserve their self-respect, and protect their ability to determine for themselves what sort of person they want to be and what ends they want to pursue.

I will not elaborate in detail on each of Hay and Cudd's conditions for oppression since readers can refer directly to them on the matter. However, I think it will help to highlight the following about Hay's conditions in particular (these highlights will apply just as well to Cudd's).

First, Hay's fourth condition entails that oppression always signifies a wrong. There are various kinds of social harms, not all are morally wrong or unjust. Incarceration is a social harm, but if the incarcerated individual is a mass murderer, then incarceration is justified. War is a social harm, but if it is truly fought in self-defense then arguably the harm is excused. However, no one would be compelled to say that the mass murderer or the aggressive side in a just war is being oppressed. This is because what makes oppression distinct as a social harm is that it is always unjust and inexcusable. Describing a social harm as just or excused is to say that it is not oppression.

Second, Hay's second condition implies that not every social group is one whose members can be oppressed. It is only groups whose members are given relatively low esteem, power and authority in society who can count as oppressed individuals. So, despite recent efforts to make such an argument against feminism, white men in our current society in America cannot be subject to oppression because their social group has historically had power, high esteem, and authority in society. Moreover, following condition 3, there exists no group G^* that benefits from denying them incentives and opportunities for the cultivation of their capacities because of their identity as white males.

Third, Hay's first condition stresses that the harms of oppression are necessarily *group specific*. That is, they are directed at individuals in virtue of their membership in a social group. In particular, it must be a group systemically given low esteem, credibility and power in society. For instance, African Americans and women were, and in some places around the world still are, historically denied the right to vote *because* they were black or female. And being black or female was tantamount to being less intelligent, less capable, less worthy of respect, less important. Since oppression is directed at

individuals for their membership in a social group, a social harm suffered for breaking a law (assuming it is just), is not a harm of oppression. Whereas, a social harm inflicted merely for having an identity of low social credibility and esteem- for instance, the legal prohibition of females from driving in Saudi Arabia, or, how in many countries in the Middle East, a rapist can get out of legal punishment by marrying his victim, or, how in Sharia court a woman's testimony is made equal to half of a man's- is oppressive harm because it is blatantly group specific.

Self-improvement as an obligation to oneself

I disagree fundamentally with Cudd on this point- the point that the oppressed person can only owe it to other oppressed persons, and not also to herself, to cultivate her human capacities. There are a couple of reasons for my disagreement. First, imagine an oppressed individual, say, someone like Hill's Deferential Wife character. She has done everything necessary to fulfill her duties to others and spends ample time and energy developing her capacities, but focuses entirely on developing the capacities that others- her husband, her children, her family, friends, society, religion- have chosen for her and that benefit them in some way. She goes well beyond what is morally required in helping others to develop their talents, donating to charities, helping others with everyday tasks, finding them studio space, coaches, teachers, playing fields, and so on.²⁶ Now, she is not at fault for not developing her capacities at all, as a couch potato or Johnson's Ne'er Do Well is, since in order to do all this she must cultivate the capacities that allow her to help others. However, by neglecting to choose for herself which capacities to cultivate independently of how they serve others, she does not genuinely adopt the end of self-improvement and is lacking in self-respect. The Deferential Wife

²⁶ Johnson, *Self-Improvement: An Essay in Kantian Ethics*, 40.

falls clearly under Johnson's *Self-Sacrificer* example. As Johnson puts it, the Self-Sacrificer is at fault because she treats herself and her capacities "as a *mere means* to the development of others".²⁷ While it is good that she is helpful to others, in order to fulfill her duty of self-improvement, she ought to treat herself as an end and do something for her own development.

To tie this back to Cudd's insistence on self-improvement as a duty we can only owe to others, think of an analogous case. Call her the Deferential Activist (or Self-Sacrificing Activist). The Deferential Activist does everything she can for her cause. She cultivates the capacities of other oppressed individuals and helps to liberate them from their oppression. However, she neglects to do anything about her own situation. She only cultivates the capacities that help her further the interests of other oppressed persons. On Cudd's account, the Deferential Activist exhibits no moral failing; she fulfills all her duties to others, including her duty to resist oppression for *their* sake- she helps them resist their oppression. She educates them about the harms of oppression, empowers them, gives them opportunities for self-improvement by arranging book clubs, sports teams, exhibition spaces, poetry readings and so on. Exactly like Johnson's Self-Sacrificer, the Deferential Activist is not at fault for having no developed capacities. Rather, like the Self-Sacrificer, she treats her capacities as a means for other's development and resistance to oppression. She does not develop any of her own capacities and interests unless they benefit others and the cause she works for. So while she is a good person in many respects, she still lacks the self-respect that she helps others to develop and fails to genuinely adopt the end of self-improvement.

Because of these cases, I think it is especially important to understand self-improvement in the context of oppression as a duty to *oneself*. Variations on Johnson's

²⁷ Johnson, *Self-Improvement: An Essay in Kantian Ethics*, 40.

Self-Sacrificer are bound to be very common in the context of oppression. We can all think of such people in our lives, perhaps our own mothers and sisters, or ourselves. We need a way to explain why these individuals deserve more, why their devoting their lives to others, while admirable, is still a sort of servility to be avoided.

Moreover, it is important to note against Cudd that, due to the harms of oppression, an oppressed person is not likely to understand herself as a member of an oppressed social group to whom she owes resistance. So she will not be able to have the kind of motivation to resist her oppression that Cudd thinks is obligatory- the motivation to resist her oppression for the sake of other oppressed persons. As Cudd herself notes, the oppressed tend not to understand their own oppression, so how can they understand their group-membership and their obligations to other oppressed persons? Therefore, I think my understanding of self-improvement as a duty to *oneself*- and as a form of resistance to oppression- is more accessible to the oppressed person than Cudd's contractarian resistance-for-the-sake-of-others approach. Understanding self-improvement and resistance to oppression as an obligation to oneself is less likely to lead an oppressed person to become the Self-Sacrificer or Deferential Activist. After all, it is a mark of their oppression that they are already prone to neglecting themselves in favor of others. It is necessary to have a conception of duties to the self to understand why such cases are morally lacking, in particular, why they are lacking in self-respect.

Internal and external harms

So far we have seen that oppression is systemic, unjust, group specific harm. Now, more needs to be said about how oppression harms. What are the "direct and indirect material and psychological forces that violate justice...[and] work in part by

coercing the oppressed to act in ways that further their own oppression” that Cudd and others refer to in their accounts of oppression?²⁸

First of all, everyone faces internal (psychological) and external (material) constraints on the quality and potential of their self-improvement. Even those in power who benefit from others’ oppression face constraints on their self-improvement. There are the usual constraints such as time, and our commitments to others. Taking the extra time to do some carpentry or yoga once in a while can be inconvenient in our fast paced, busy world. Many of us fear failure and would rather avoid letting ourselves and others down instead of trying to pursue an ability that we care about but might not flourish in. I know from experience that facing a blank piece of canvas is daunting; starting a new painting provokes anxiety. Some of us may have mental illnesses that prevent or inhibit self-improvement in a very similar way that oppression does. Anyone can become indifferent and detached from life after a period of stress or frustration. It is always tempting to surrender oneself to pleasure and comfort, to allow oneself to be dragged around by one’s desires and emotions- exactly what Kant warned us to avoid. It is easy to become a slacker, never striving for progress, content with wherever we are in our development. It is also common, when we find something we really like to do or are good at, to spend all our time and energy cultivating it. In academia especially, it can be easy to spend all one’s time working, as though with blinders on, never to explore or nurture other capacities and interests. As an academic it is easy to neglect oneself in regards to the arts, physical fitness, or one’s social capacities. These are all examples of common constraints on self-improvement that anyone can experience.

In the context of oppression, however, the constraints are more intense and take the form of *unjust group specific harm*.²⁹ A woman in a patriarchal society suffers the

²⁸ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 26.

constraints on her self-cultivation in a distinct way because they harm her, “not solely as an individual with particular handicaps or failures” but also as a member of the group of all women, “whose members are considered collectively deserving such treatment”.³⁰ The harms of oppression can be divided into two kinds: External (physical and material) and internal (psychological and intellectual) constraints (the division is not strict, since these harms overlap in many ways).

External obstacles on self-improvement are straightforward. They include physical or material constraints on a person’s mobility, lack of material resources and opportunities, insufficient education, denial of basic rights, poverty, and even occupational and social demands. These constraints can cause a person to be ignorant of self-improvement as a possibility for them at all. In cases where they do, I follow Hill in saying that it would seem wrong to hold them accountable for failing to develop themselves. However, I do not think complete ignorance about the possibility for improvement is normally the case for oppressed individuals. Many oppressed individuals understand themselves as capable of progress. The external constraints also include threats of bodily harm from others who take the individuals’ self-improvement to be threatening to them. Normally, when oppressed individuals cultivate themselves it threatens the authority and power of those who benefit from their oppression. Oppressed individuals tend to put their physical bodies at risk by seeking to develop their capacities. For example, women in abusive families are likely to provoke further physical abuse when they attempt to pursue a capacity that does not serve the interests of her abuser. Similarly, slaves in the southern United States who attempted to learn to read risked being whipped by their masters. In many conservative countries, women

²⁹ Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, Feminism: Resisting Oppression*, 3.

³⁰ Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, Feminism: Resisting Oppression*, 3.

who jog or run outside for exercise are prone to be catcalled and heckled much more than women who are walking to get somewhere, because the woman who is exercising is much more threatening- she is outwardly displaying her strength and her effort and desire to become stronger and healthier. In the context of war self-cultivation, especially in its intellectual forms, can make a person seem dangerous- a target. ISIS, for instance, regularly executes journalists and intellectuals, making an example out of them to instill fear in the population as it attempting to infiltrate and control.

Internal constraints include the psychological and intellectual inhibitions and harms of oppression on one's self-cultivation. The psychological inhibitions include debilitating emotions and attitudes such as fear, apathy, anxiety, shame, trauma, low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, deformed desires (when the agent desires for what is not good for them, or is "ill informed about the true nature of what they desire"), servility and an overall lack in self-respect.³¹ These inhibitions hinder one's ability to find incentives for adopting the end of self-improvement, making it difficult to even regard oneself as worthy of it. They make one more likely to defer to the will of someone else, someone perceived as more credible and important than the oppressed person takes herself to be. Moreover, if an oppressed person does find the motivation to cultivate a capacity, these inhibitions will make it extremely difficult for them to feel as though they actually are making progress. They will tend to attribute their success to others, or to luck. Moreover, when they have setbacks, as we all do in self-cultivation, an oppressed person will have a harder time recovering and will be prone to interpreting

³¹ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 155-184. In *Analyzing Oppression*, Cudd divides the psychological forces into seven direct and three indirect forces. The seven direct psychological forces of oppression are terror and trauma, humiliation and degradation, objectification, tradition and convention, religion, ideology, and cultural domination. The three indirect psychological forces: shame and low self-esteem, false consciousness, and deformed desires.

the setback as their fault, their mistake, their failure, when it may be neither of those things.

Oppression can also harm a person's rational nature. It can do this by actually constraining a person's ability to reason and form an accurate self-image and understanding of the world. Oppression notoriously causes self-deception, false beliefs, weakness of will and an inability to deliberate autonomously.³² For instance, the subjects of oppression tend to believe falsely that they are naturally inferior and that they actually deserve the oppressive treatment they receive and that seeking anything more would be wrong. Many oppressed persons are ignorant of the fact that they suffer harms of oppression. As Cudd aptly puts it, "it is often part of their oppression that it is hidden from them under the guises of tradition, [or convention] or divine command or the natural order of things".³³ As Mill observes about the women in his society, they are not "slaves merely", but "willing one[s]... brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others".³⁴

With the terrible nature of oppression now in mind, we can see why philosophers have been tempted to suggest that oppressed persons do not owe it to themselves to cultivate their capacities. Requiring oppressed persons to develop themselves makes people uncomfortable; how can anyone be obligated to do something that they are systemically obstructed from doing and when self-cultivation can lead oppressed persons to suffer further abuse for disturbing or threatening the power structure? In the next part of the paper I will explain why oppressed persons still ought

³² Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, Feminism: Resisting Oppression*, 123-126.

³³ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 198.

³⁴ Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 141; Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, Feminism: Resisting Oppression*, 3.

to cultivate their capacities- that they can and owe it to themselves to do so. By doing so, not only do they preserve their self-respect and prevent the degradation of their rational capacities but they also engage in resistance to their oppression at the individual level.

4 SELF-IMPROVEMENT UNDER OPPRESSION

On a Kantian framework, oppressed individuals, too, ought to cultivate their human abilities as a way of respecting their rational nature. Rational nature, for Kant, is essentially our ability to determine our own goals; to decide for ourselves (within social and historical limitations) how we want to live, what kinds of attitudes we want to have, and what we want to do in life. In order to respect our nature as end-setters, we ought to prepare ourselves to be able to achieve the ends that we set. We prepare ourselves to achieve our ends by cultivating our human capacities- the powers that enable us to actualize our plans. In doing so, we treat ourselves consistently with our nature as end setters. If we did not intentionally cultivate any of our capacities, we would be unable to achieve ends that we determine autonomously. We would fail to respect our nature as end setters by neglecting to develop the abilities that allow us to fulfill our ends. To use Johnson's metaphor, in failing to develop ourselves, we treat our capacities "as a fixed container into which one must pour one's ends" as opposed to "an elastic container to be stretched and shaped to fit any ends [we] may decide to pursue".³⁵ The only exception to this moral requirement of self-improvement in the context of oppression is when the oppression is so severe that the individual loses her rationality. In such tragic cases, the individual is no longer a moral agent and can have no moral obligations at all, let alone the obligation to respect her rational capacities by adopting the end of self-improvement.

³⁵Johnson, *Self-Improvement: An Essay in Kantian Ethics*, 90.

The objection from ought-implies-can

The view that oppressed persons are not morally obligated to develop themselves is based on at least two possible worries. The first worry I call the objection from ought-implies-can.³⁶ Essentially, this is the view that oppressed persons are categorically *unable*-materially, intellectually and psychologically- to develop their capacities. Therefore, holding them morally responsible for doing so violates the Kantian principle ought-implies-can.

The second worry is that, even if oppressed persons are capable of developing themselves, requiring them to do so imposes too onerous a task on them. Certainly, it is good if oppressed persons do develop their capacities, and they have good moral reasons to do so, but it is too burdensome to require them to do so as a moral obligation. Therefore, self-improvement can only ever be supererogatory for the oppressed. By way of responding to these two objections, this section argues that oppressed persons *can* and *owe it to themselves*, as a requirement of self-respect, to cultivate their capacities. Excusing oppressed individuals from this requirement of self-respect cannot be justified on the basis that oppressed persons cannot fulfill the duty, nor on the basis that it is too onerous a task for them to be required to do so. Finally, I want to argue that in failing to adopt the end of self-improvement, oppressed persons, while not blameworthy, lack self-respect and ultimately fail to take an attitude of resistance to their oppression.

Against the objection from ought-implies-can, I argue that oppressed persons are still able to develop their capacities. I support this argument with two claims. First, there are examples- extraordinary and ordinary cases- in history and everyday life of

³⁶ I adapt the name of this objection from Hay's discussion of an analogous objection regarding the obligation to resist oppression.

oppressed persons who manage to cultivate their powers despite the harms and limitations of oppression. The second supporting point takes a more theoretical approach by referring to the Kantian understanding of what grounds duties to oneself. On a Kantian view, the oppressed person still possesses a rational will with absolute moral worth and is morally bound to treating it in a way that is consistent with its absolute worth. Respecting oneself entails cultivating the abilities that allow one's practical reason to fulfill all sorts of ends. Even in the context of oppression, refusing to improve oneself is to express the attitude that one's humanity does not have the special value that it has.

An empirical response: examples of self-improvement under oppression

The objection from ought-implies can go like this: oppressed individuals are systemically and unjustly deprived of material resources and opportunities for self-improvement and, they are in various ways psychologically inhibited from striving for it. Sometimes they are even prevented from seeing self-improvement as a viable option for them at all. Often, they believe strongly that they are by nature inferior and have no capacities worth cultivating except insofar as they serve others. Oppressed persons tend to be either ignorant or confused about their rights, moral status, and potentials. Therefore, goes the objection, it must be that oppressed individuals are literally unable to develop themselves. Since they are physically, intellectually and psychologically constrained from seeking self-development, then by the Kantian principle "ought implies can", they are under no obligation to improve themselves.

The objection is problematic in a number of ways. For starters, it is based on a faulty inference from "oppressed individuals are under great socially enforced constraints in respect to their self-improvement" to "it is impossible for oppressed

individuals to improve themselves”. While the former claim is certainly true; the oppressed will have a difficult time cultivating their capacities because they are systemically obstructed from doing so, I think the consequent is false- the project of self-improvement is still accessible to them, despite the socio-political attempts to compel them away from it. The fact that a person’s society tries to prevent them from doing something by attempting to manipulate them and making resources unavailable does not make the task impossible to the person. Moreover, as I mentioned in the first section of the paper, the requirement of self-improvement does not require an individual to be successful in developing one’s talents, it requires primarily that one adopt the end and strive for it when possible.

There are salient examples in history of oppressed persons who have been successful in developing themselves. Some have even flourished in their capacities despite their oppression. Among the extraordinary examples are Frederick Douglass, Malala Yousafzai, Martin Luther King Jr., and Epictetus. If we want to put these aside as rare cases, there are countless examples from ordinary life as well; examples of people we know and interact with daily who have succeeded in developing themselves despite their oppression. Consider the single Latina mother of three who juggles two jobs and struggles to raise her family but still manages to write poetry in the evenings. Consider the woman who, against the will of her abusive husband, secretly lifts weights because it makes her feel good, strong, and healthy and helps her cope with stress and adversity. Consider the African American janitor at a low income school who cultivates his capacity as a friend and mentor by trying to reduce bullying on campus, providing guidance and support to students in crisis, and encouraging students to believe in themselves. Consider the youth, especially the young women all over the Middle East who are persistently discouraged by their families and society from questioning

traditional values, restricted even from forming their own preferences, likes and dislikes, and above all, from voicing their opinions; and yet, despite the risks, they still find avenues for self-expression and cultivation through the arts, intellectual pursuits, and other social and physical activities. Consider the numerous academics and activists from minority backgrounds; the Arab Feminist writers, historians, journalists, artists and sociologists Nawal El-Saadawi, Mona Eltahawy, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi, who stand up against social injustices in their culture and religion, who educate and inspire others about the different forms of oppression despite the regular threats of violence they receive from those in power, tyrants, fundamentalists, patriarchs and anti-intellectuals, who are threatened by their work and want to keep them repressed, their stories unheard, their voices silent.

Slaves can and have historically been known to spend their time in enslavement teaching themselves to read, perfecting their craft, taking up arts, planning for their escape, practicing African traditions, and educating young slaves about their heritage. In doing so, African slaves determined their own identity, independently of interests of the slave master. They told stories, sang songs during long hours of work, and kept journals. Frederick Douglass is an excellent example among numerous cases of self-cultivation under slavery. As a child, Douglass secretly learned to read by observing white children, stealing newspapers, political pamphlets, books and other reading material that belonged to the white men under whom he worked. As a result of his self-cultivation, he was eventually able to escape slavery. He is well known for writing, later as a free man, “knowledge is the pathway from slavery to freedom”.³⁷ A slave, like Douglass, who chooses to spend his little free time playing the drinking games and wrestling matches

³⁷ Jacobs, H. and Appiah, K. (2004). *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Paperback, pp. xiii, 4.

the slave masters put on to keep the slaves docile is morally lacking. The slave ought to refuse to engage in these activities that are meant to keep him docile and content in his position as a slave and instead pursue an activity that serves his interests and will ultimately prepare him for freedom, even if freedom is not in sight or is ultimately never met.

Of course, most oppressed persons cannot afford to speak up as the scholars and activists I mention do. And most slaves failed to cultivate themselves out of socially imposed ignorance or confusion about morality and their true worth. Many oppressed persons do not even have access to an education, let alone the intellectual outlets for self-improvement that involve reading, writing, and developing an objective understanding of their oppression. The vast majority of oppressed persons will tend never to come to the clear and conscious understanding that they are victims of social injustices. However, it would be wrong to write self-improvement off as impossible in these cases. Based on the empirical examples alone, it would be absurd to argue that it is *impossible* for the oppressed to improve themselves. Thus, maintaining that the oppressed, too, ought to cultivate their capacities is no violation of “ought implies can”.

A theoretical response

I have just established that self-cultivation is at least a possible end for oppressed individuals because there are examples- ordinary and extraordinary- of oppressed persons who actually succeed in developing their capacities and adopting self-improvement as an end. Now, I want to provide a different reason for rejecting the objection from ought-implies-can. The reason is that, assuming a Kantian framework, oppressed individuals can fulfill the duty because despite their oppression, they still possess a rational will. For Kant, a functioning rational will is all a human being needs to

be able to fulfill duties and to be bound by duties. A person's circumstances, society, physical ability, and natural dispositions may make it easier or more difficult to fulfill one's duties, but for Kant, they cannot make fulfilling them impossible. Thus, as rational agents, oppressed persons too are subject to all the duties that are grounded in the rational will- including the imperfect duty of self-improvement. Thus, oppressed persons are as worthy of respect as any other rational person is. As a requirement of self-respect, then, they owe it to themselves to cultivate their capacities.³⁸ So, the charge that it is not an obligation for them to cultivate their capacities because, as a feature of their oppression, it is impossible for them to do so is unfounded if we take the Kantian story seriously.

There may be good reasons to disagree with Kant's conception of the rational will as the only thing that can have absolute worth and as the source of all moral value. Most contemporary Kantians are not committed to Kant's teleological understanding of human nature. There also good reasons to disagree with his view that rational nature cannot be taken away or affected by the harms of oppression at all. In fact, as I explained in section 2, one's ability to reason does tend to be impaired, and in the most severe cases even disabled, by the harms of oppression. Oppression causes false beliefs, self-deception, a lack of self-trust and a tendency to defer to the beliefs and will of others in its subjects. As a result, some oppressed persons will not succeed in developing their capacities, or even adopting self-development as an end. But we need not accept Kant's metaphysical commitments to see that it is possible and morally necessary for oppressed persons to adopt the policy of self-development and to try to cultivate their capacities.

³⁸ Perhaps it would be helpful here to say more about why self-improvement is a requirement of self-respect for Kant. Since I cannot provide a detailed account of it here, I direct readers to Johnson's helpful discussion in his book *Self-Improvement: An Essay in Kantian Ethics*.

If all this is right, then the oppressed person, too, would be acting irrationally by not improving herself because she would be failing to develop the capacities that enable her practical reason to be effective. Since she has a rational will capable of determining its own ends, she ought to treat herself consistently as such; and that entails taking measures to protect her rational will from further harm. By cultivating her capacities, the oppressed person prepares her rational will to be practically effective. She prepares herself to fulfill the rational ends she will want to pursue in life. It seems at least intuitively plausible that being a couch potato, for both oppressed and non-oppressed persons, is to fail to honor one's humanity- one's ability to set ends. In order to properly respect one's humanity, one must cultivate one's human abilities, "putting at its disposal the capacity to achieve all sorts of ends".³⁹

The objection that self-improvement is too demanding under oppression

Someone might object by arguing that, even if oppressed persons *can* adopt the end of self-improvement, it is too burdensome a task to be a moral obligation for them. While self-improvement in the context of oppression is certainly heroic, it would be unreasonable to say that failing to develop oneself in the context of oppression is to act immorally towards oneself. After all, the objection goes, oppressed persons tend to put themselves in danger when they attempt to cultivate their capacities. The project of self-improvement as an oppressed person can be exhausting, victimizing, and counterproductive. It can make an oppressed person the target of retribution from others.⁴⁰ Sometimes, failing to cultivate oneself can be an act of self-defense.

³⁹ Johnson, *Self-Improvement: An Essay in Kantian Ethics*, 86-87.

⁴⁰ Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, Feminism: Resisting Oppression*, 128.

To respond to this line of objection, I argue that self-improvement can take many different forms. It does not require a person to improve every capacity one has, to spend most of one's time cultivating their capacities, or to seize every opportunity to improve oneself that comes along. I refer back to the Kantian classification of the duty as an *imperfect* duty. As an imperfect duty, there is a wide range of actions that can fulfill the requirement of self-improvement. Moreover, there is "latitude for free choice" as to how one goes about satisfying it. One can choose the capacities one wants to improve (as long as no other duties are violated) and at what times to cultivate them and to what extent. So, self-improvement cannot be too burdensome in the context of oppression because it does not require the oppressed person to perform specific actions, at specific times.

Moreover, as an imperfect duty, self-improvement essentially requires adopting an end. It does not require a person to maximize the cultivation of their capacities or even to be successful in cultivating them. Since it is a requirement to have a certain attitude regarding oneself, a person can fulfill the duty without being especially good at anything. As Hill puts it, self-improvement is a duty to "make oneself worthy of one's humanity by becoming more fit and ready to live as a rational autonomous person...regardless of the extent to which we will actually be able to live and serve in such a world".⁴¹ An oppressed person can become more fit and ready to live as a rational and autonomous person simply by spending some time cultivating a hobby or interest. It could be anything from a range of possible capacities- reading, painting, writing, singing, doing mathematics, improving one's memory or interpersonal skills- and they need never be perfect or successful at the skill, or to cultivate numerous skills. It does not count against fulfilling the duty if in cultivating one's talents, progress is

⁴¹ Hill, "Imperfect Duties to Oneself", *Kant's Tugendlehre*, 299.

slow, materially and psychologically limited, difficult, or occasional; and it does not count against the duty if excellence is never attained. Lying idle and passive to the sway of circumstances, being content with never improving oneself, especially in the context of oppression, suggests a defect in character, even under circumstances of oppression. The point is that everyone ought to make an effort to be a whole person, so to speak. To develop oneself so as to be prepared to fulfill the goals that one might have in life.

Moreover, the duty does not assume or require that the agent live under any particular conditions. It does not assume that the agent enjoys the rights and social freedoms that the oppressed are denied. It does not even require that the agent knowingly nurture their capacities as a response to their oppression, or an effort to reduce or resist it. Neither are there specific requirements on the time a person spends cultivating their capacities. As long as the maxim is adopted and there is a sustained effort to regulate one's actions by the maxim over the course of life and no other duties are violated in the process, different actions performed at different levels, under different constraints and circumstances, and in different amounts equally satisfy the duty.

Sometimes oppression leads a person to develop a capacity that they would never have acquired if it were not for their oppression. For instance, a slave may never have learned how to build houses if it were not for his being enslaved as a house builder. While the context under which he learned to build houses is indeed terrible, the skill of building itself is a good and respect-worthy skill to have. The slave can come to respect himself for having this skill, he can come to esteem himself as a good builder, an attitude that will raise his moral, increase the quality of his life and may lead him eventually to use his skill for his own ends. At least, it prepares him for that possibility. Similarly, a woman in an abusive relationship may have never learned to use art as a

means of self-expression if it were not for the inner turmoil caused by her abuse. The skill the oppression leads her to acquire and cultivate protects her from complete servility. In identifying herself as a painter, she can have a sense of identity and value for herself in spite of and apart from the forces that deny her the value and identity that she deserves. Her art is an expression of her resistance, and can lead the way for her freedom.

Self-improvement as resistance to oppression

I have been trying to build a case for the moral requirement of self-improvement in the context of oppression. I started this section by addressing two potential objections to the claim that oppressed persons who neglect their development are guilty of some moral failing. I argued that the oppressed can and often do develop themselves and that there are various accessible ways for them to fulfill the obligation within the constraints they are under, including taking up an art, practicing a sport, fostering a practical or interpersonal skill, educating themselves, and so on. The idea that it may be difficult to do our duty- that we face obstacles, fears and aversions in seeking what is good for us- does not make fulfilling our duty less possible or morally necessary. Now, I want to build a positive case in support of the moral requirement of self-improvement under oppression.

Oppressed persons ought to adopt the end of self-improvement for three related reasons: first, adopting the end is vital for self-respect; one cannot sufficiently respect herself as an end-setter without cultivating the capacities that allow her to fulfill the ends she sets. Without making the active effort to develop skills and abilities that help her fulfill any goals she might have, she ends up only fulfilling the goals that fit the capacities she is already given by nature or circumstance. As Johnson put it, she uses

her capacities as a container into which to pour her ends, rather than as elastic to be stretched to fit any ends she might someday will. Second, self-improvement offers protection against the harms of oppression; cultivating a talent, skill or ability is a way of preserving one's rational nature against the forces that attempt to subordinate and repress it.

Finally, self-improvement is an effective and accessible method of resisting oppression when other means of resistance such as activism, forming solidarity with other oppressed persons, and opting out of oppressive social norms are too risky, inaccessible or are not seen as a viable option by the oppressed person (who, as a mark of her oppression, tends not to understand that she is oppressed). Self-improvement is more accessible than these other forms of resistance because, as we have seen, as an imperfect duty, all it requires is adopting an end. This entails that resistance through self-improvement can actually play out as an internal process of *recognizing* that one is being treated wrongly that her fears and inhibitions are largely a result of this unjust treatment. Only by having self-improvement as an end can she then refuse to believe what oppressive systems are telling her about the worth and character of people like her.⁴² It happens by Moreover, it leaves latitude for free choice as to which powers to cultivate, when, and to what degree to cultivate them. So, adopting the end of self-improvement is both a requirement of self-respect and a foundational means of resisting oppression.

When an oppressed person fails to adopt the end of self-improvement, she loses the means of protecting herself from the harms of oppression. She can only protect herself from being incapacitated and controlled by others by cultivating herself. But if she doesn't adopt self-improvement as an end, she will fail to provide herself with the

⁴² Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, Feminism: Resisting Oppression*, 141.

skills and powers that allow her to create and fulfill autonomous plans. She will not have the skills that allow her to live an autonomous life. Even if she never succeeds in developing herself, even if she never becomes excellent at anything, merely by adopting the end of self-improvement, she puts herself in a better position to understand that she is being treated wrongly by those who oppress her- and that is the first and the most necessary step in resisting.

The slave who strives to cultivate his capacities against the will and interest of his master inevitably strives to be free. She refuses, against the odds, to let others control her and deprive her of her self-respect. She is hitting two birds with one stone, so to speak: she cultivates herself, strengthening her self-respect and autonomy, increasing the quality of her own life and the lives of her dependents. At the same time, she engages in an individualized struggle to remove the manifestations of oppression in her life. In teaching herself how to read, a slave is simultaneously cultivating her capacities and preparing herself for resisting her slave master. She prepares herself for attaining freedom, for fulfilling the ends that her “reason might some day use” (MM 6:443). By cultivating herself, she resists oppression

I would like to emphasize that my focus is on oppression as experienced by the *individual* in her *everyday life*. I am aware that oppression is a distinctively structural phenomenon that is caused and perpetuated by social institutions. Moreover, I feel strongly that all forms of oppression must ultimately face collective *political* resistance. Individualized resistance through self-cultivation cannot replace political forms of resistance such as activism, fostering solidarity between oppressed persons, boycotting institutions and opting out of oppressive social norms. On its own, self-improvement cannot be effective in removing oppression. We may even have a moral obligation to engage in political resistance to oppression. However, my focus here has been on

offering self-improvement as the most basic and accessible form of resistance and defense against oppression. One that I think is necessary for any oppressed person to live a good life under the constraints that are imposed on her.

Though I will not be able to argue for it fully here, I want to suggest that one cannot be rationally motivated (or motivated for the right reasons) to resist oppression at the institutional level unless they have already adopted the end of self-improvement and the self-regarding attitudes it entails at the internal individual level. In other words, one can only reasonably will to participate in political forms of resistance like civil disobedience if they are already committed to cultivating their capacities and regard themselves as having capacities worthy of autonomous cultivation and respect. Otherwise, individuals will participate in political resistance not to achieve opportunities for their self-cultivation and the self-cultivation of others who are oppressed and to exercise their autonomy, but for the wrong reasons like the desire to take revenge, to make others suffer, or to please and gain the confidence of other revolutionaries. One ought to participate in political resistance only on the condition that they can maintain and fight with self-respect and for the proper end of gaining deserved rights and freedom.

The main argument in this paper focuses on oppressed individuals and the social limitations they face on a daily basis against the cultivation of their capacities and talents. By arguing that self-improvement is indeed an obligation for oppressed individuals, and that they can rise up to the task despite the forces that demoralize and constrain them, I hope to show how individuals can cope with their oppression on a daily basis, how they can make something positive and meaningful out of their adversity, and how they can still resist, preserving their self-respect and autonomy against the efforts to subordinate and demoralize them.

5 THREE PATHWAYS TO FREEDOM

I would like to conclude the paper by comparing three action guiding ends or ways of life that an oppressed person can take in reaction to her oppression. They can also be understood as three distinct paths towards freedom. Two of the paths are extremes on the spectrum. I argue that the middle path between the extremes is the morally worthy path. It is the one most likely to cause real and stable changes in the social order while at the same time bolstering the self-respect of its subjects.

The first extreme is the life of *apatheia*. It is illustrated by the popular image of the Stoic sage. *Apatheia* comes from the Greek “without suffering” or “without passion” (*a- pathos*). It refers to a state of self-control and utter tranquility in response to changes in the external world. Changes in the external world include, as Epictetus says, the fortunes and misfortunes done to one’s “body, property, reputation, [and] office”, all of which are “not within our power” as human beings.⁴³

The Stoics believed that emotions and impassioned desires- like anger, envy, love, attachments to others and material things- all result from false beliefs about the ontology of external nature, which they took to be deeply deterministic. In particular, passions are the result of falsely believing that a person has control over what happens in her life and that the things that happen outside of her mind, to her and others are the sorts of things that can be good or bad. For the Stoic, changes in circumstances can only be morally indifferent. The only goods are the internal virtues of human beings- courage, temperance, wisdom, justice and so on. Since external harms- including death,

⁴³ Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 1.1.

bodily harm, restrictions on physical freedom, and abuse by others- are not truly bad, the Stoic says we must not be disturbed or angered when they occur to us or to those we have relationships with. Neither should we try to prevent such harms from happening. Our efforts against deterministic nature can only be futile. In response to her oppression, then, the caricature of the Stoic sage focuses entirely on “living in accordance with nature”, conforming her beliefs and attitudes to the deterministic indifferent nature of the universe. She does not complain, speak out, or resist. Instead, she embodies the ideal of *apatheia*- complete equanimity and endurance without internal disturbance or complaint.

To get the full sense of the Stoic route to freedom through *apatheia*, the following are a few quotes from Epictetus regarding how one ought to live in general as well as how one ought to live under oppression. These quotes nail down the idea that for the Stoics, resistance to oppression is entirely internal and institutional change is neither possible nor morally necessary:

“Such was, and is, and will be the nature of the universe, and it isn’t possible that things should come into being in any other way than they do at present” (Fragments 8).

“You should behave in life as you do at a banquet. Something is being passed around and arrives in front of you: reach out your hand and take your share politely. It passes: don’t try to hold it back. It has yet to reach you: don’t project your desire towards it, but wait until it arrives in front of you. So act likewise with regard to your children, to your wife, to public office, to riches and the time will come when you’re worthy to have a seat at the banquets of the gods. And if you don’t even take these things when they’re in front of you, but view them with contempt, then you’ll not only share in the banquets of the gods, but also in their rule” (Enchiridion 15).

“Remember that what insults you isn’t the person who abuses you or hits you, but your judgment that such people are insulting you. So whenever anyone irritates you, recognize that it is your opinion that has irritated you” (Enchiridion 20).

“‘My brother is wronging me’. Very well, maintain the relation that you have towards him; don’t look to what he is doing, but to what you must do if you are to keep your choice in

harmony with nature. For no one will cause you harm if you don't wish it; you'll have been harmed only when you suppose that you've been harmed" (Enchiridion 30).

While the Stoics are fascinating and extremely influential, especially in therapeutic practice today, I find the life of *apatheia* in response to one's oppression morally lacking. The fault is the caricature of the Stoic does not recognize oppression as a real injustice that ought to be actively resisted and removed; she is bound to reinforce and allow oppressive social harms to continue. While Stoicism might help one cope and rise above the emotional turmoil that can come as a result of oppression, I think the oppressed are entitled to feelings of anger and frustration with authority. Moreover, they ought to be openly recognized as subjects of systemic external and internal harm. Stoicism would seem to reinforce the debilitating tendency to feel that one has no control over their life and that their efforts for independence would be futile. Fatalism is far too common, even in today's world, and especially among the oppressed. I think it is harmful, it makes the oppressed docile and further inhibits their progress. Moreover, the Stoic attitude seems, at least intuitively, to discourage political forms of resistance like activism and civil disobedience and cannot be relied upon as a foundation for social change. If the harms of oppression are not real, if they are only the products of our false judgments about the natural order, then there is no need to act to change the norms that are involved in oppression. In sum, Stoic *apatheia* is not the appropriate attitude in response to oppression because, while it may be promising in preserving the oppressed person's self-respect and in allowing them to internally rise above their oppression, it cannot be relied on for social change and cannot help the oppressed person plan an escape from her oppression, or even to feel strongly that the harm done by one's oppressor are real and grave harms.

Now let's move on to an alternative path to freedom, to the second extreme. It is the life of *reckless rebellion*. I have two examples to illustrate this kind of life. The second example is modeled on the first and is more relevant to the social injustice of oppression. However, I find it helpful to include the first example because it really brings out the sense in which the second example is morally lacking. On to the first example.

The life of *reckless rebellion* is well illustrated by the familiar stereotype of the rebellious teenager. He takes any opportunity to rebel against his parents and his society's norms- taking drugs, getting a tattoo, sneaking out of the house at night, skipping classes, breaking curfew, listening to angry music, dying his hair green, and so on. He is motivated by anger and the retributive urge to express that he has full control of his life despite the efforts of his school, family and society to constrain him. He takes action against authority without calculation, even when his acts of resistance result in a greater and more oppressive effort against him. He gets grounded frequently, spends time in juvenile hall, detention after school, is avoided and bullied by his peers, and has a rocky relationship with his family. While he is not to blame for his actions, I think it is clear that he exhibits a deficiency in character. While he is courageous and often succeeds in getting what he wants, he is unwise, intemperate and is more interested in being provocative than in securing justice and gaining the responsibilities of being an adult.

In the context of social oppression, the rebellious teenager is analogous to the stereotype of the man-hating feminist, or the life of misandry. The man-hating feminist is the woman who rebels against patriarchy primarily out of anger, frustration, and the desire for retribution. Ironically, in doing so, she ends up embodying many of the wrongs of patriarchy. She objectifies men and believes prejudices like "all they think

about is sex” and “they hate us”, which get in the way of her making male friends. She does not know much about the history of feminism or feminist theory, but she still seizes every chance she gets to express her anger at the patriarchy and traditional gender roles. She is quick to blame men for her troubles and believes that men can’t be feminists. She regularly attends protests because she needs an outlet to express her anger and frustration. Her cause is just, and, like the rebellious teenager, her actions might be effective in resisting patriarchy, but her motivation for resisting leaves something to be desired. Instead of being moved against patriarchy by the desire for justice, peace, equality and mutual understanding between the sexes, and the freedom to cultivate herself, she is moved by the desire to provoke and anger authority. Unlike the Stoic, the man-hating feminist has a reliable way of bringing about social change. Yet, she does not act with morality and her resistance is hateful and hate-inspiring. Not only is this route to freedom counterproductive and undignified, but it is also costly and inaccessible to most oppressed persons, especially those who tend, as a mark of their oppression, to be highly self-doubtful, anxious, careful and are not naturally disposed to have the feelings and personality that the man-hating feminist flaunts.

So far we have seen two extreme reactions to oppression. I argued that the first is morally lacking because while it may preserve self-respect, it does not recognize that the harms of oppression are real, which means that it cannot play a foundational role in bringing about social change. The second extreme reaction to oppression that I described has no problem pushing the buttons of social change, but it is wrongheaded, lacks self-respect and tends to inspire hatred. Now I want to propose a middle route between these extremes as the morally superior reaction to one’s oppression and pathway to freedom. The middle route is superior because makes possible both self-respect and concrete social change.

The middle route says “knowledge is the pathway from slavery to freedom”.⁴⁴ It is the route of life-long striving for the cultivation of one’s capacities in preparation for fulfilling the autonomous ends that a person might one day choose. This route is nicely illustrated by the extraordinary life of Frederick Douglass. Like Epictetus, Douglass was born a slave. After multiple unsuccessful attempts, Douglass escaped slavery at age 20. He went on to become a great author, orator and leader of the abolitionist movement. But his success all started in small efforts to cultivate himself. At age 12, Douglass secretly began to teach himself to read and write. He learned by observing white children, stealing newspapers, political pamphlets, books and other reading material, anything he could get his hands on. Through this process, he soon came to the realization that his enslavement was unjust. His successful escape from slavery and his success in building a stable and flourishing life after his escape was ultimately a result of slow and incremental progress in improving his capacities.

Douglass’ life is extraordinary. There is no doubt that he goes above and beyond what is required by the Kantian duty of self-improvement. The kind of reaction to one’s oppression I want to convey here is also exemplified by the lives of ordinary people we know, friends and colleagues we all have; people who manage to be extremely resourceful and successful in cultivating themselves despite their struggles with oppression. In doing so, they often come to escape it or lessen its harms. Moreover, by cultivating themselves, they prove that they are not to be defined by their oppression; they are more than what the oppressive institutions want to make of them. These people are able to separate themselves from the identity imposed on them by their oppression by creating a different identity through the cultivation of their capacities.

⁴⁴ Jacobs, H. and Appiah, K. (2004). *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Paperback, pp. xiii, 4.

There are numerous examples of such people: Consider the woman whose husband refuses to allow her to get a job and for whom divorce is not an option. She works her way up to employment against his will by starting small: taking classes at the local art center and eventually becoming employed as an art teacher. Consider the young homosexual male living in a conservative society who takes up physical exercise and meditation to relieve anxiety and boost his self-confidence in spite of abuse at home and school. Consider the slaves on plantations in the south who cultivated themselves by singing slave songs, creating and preserving their own African identity, rejecting the identity imposed on them by their enslavement. Consider the woman who is prohibited from voicing her views and turns to art to express herself, perhaps even more effectively than she could ever do with words.

The middle route I have been describing is superior because not only does it secure self-respect, but it also has potential to cause real and lasting changes in one's oppressive situation. As I argued earlier, self-improvement under oppression is inevitably resistance and, as it did with Frederick Douglass, can incrementally lead to freedom. But unlike the resistance of the reckless rebel, self-improvement is not resistance for its own sake. Adopting the end of self-improvement is true to the ideal goal of activism- it seeks to establish freedom and justice. Its aim is to build and protect the ability and freedom to fulfill one's plans and rational ends.

The reckless rebel neglects the care and understanding required to secure a stable and moral life. She tends to be driven by the desire for revenge and to inflict suffering on the oppressor and is lacking in self-respect. The Stoic who strives for *apatheia* in response to her oppression is likely not to fight back externally and cannot cause real social and institutional change. The middle ground, the life of self-improvement, however, seems most promising in both securing self-respect and

causing concrete social change. Through the cultivation of the mind, body, and spirit, the middle route gives its subjects both the internal and external power to flourish under the challenges of an oppressed life, promising to lead the way to a true and stable freedom.

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