BEAUTIFUL ARROGANCE

Matthew Hernandez

A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Philosophy.

Chapel Hill
2017

Approved by:
Susan Wolf
Thomas E. Hill, Jr.
Douglas MacLean
ABSTRACT

Matthew Hernandez: Beautiful Arrogance
(Under the direction of Susan Wolf)

My aim in this thesis is to examine how we understand arrogance, what occurs when it is attributed to oppressed peoples, and how our evaluation of arrogance changes in contexts of oppression. I argue that arrogance is an attitude where one views oneself as more important than others, which is offensive from a moral point of view. However, members of oppressed groups, when engaging in protest, are often called arrogant despite not demonstrating this attitude. I present two explanations for why viewers may think protesters are arrogant and put forth a further explanation of how this practice reflects and reinforces oppressions. Finally, I will argue that when members of oppressed groups are arrogant, their arrogance can be a sign of excess basal self-respect, which is inspiring for others. I will call this beautiful arrogance, which, all things considered, is good and can be utilized as a form of resistance.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My work here benefitted greatly from the encouragement, guidance, and suggestions from my advisor Susan Wolf. I feel incredibly fortunate to have worked with her on this project. Her confidence in me was extremely helpful when working through the various drafts, and I am nothing but thankful for her support. I also feel incredibly fortunate to have the support and guidance from my other committee members Tom Hill and Doug MacLean. The initial paper on arrogance that inspired this thesis was written for Tom’s Spring 2016 seminar on moral attitudes, so extra thanks are due to him for designing that course and encouraging me to develop these ideas. When I was working on that initial paper, I developed many of my thoughts while discussing arrogance and oppression with my cohort-mate Sylvie Ramirez. I am thankful for her friendship and philosophical discussion as I am for the entirety of the UNC Chapel Hill graduate student community. I am particularly thankful for input from Macy Salzberger and Tamara Fakhoury whose suggestions significantly helped with various aspects of the work. I would be remiss if I did not also thank my undergraduate advisor Angela Coventry; I would not be in graduate school without her. Nor would I be here without the loving support of my parents who have encouraged my further education. Finally, though certainly not least significantly, I need to thank my partner Irena Rindos who has been a well of support: from talking over various examples with me to giving me a relaxing place to write, and encouragement when I was struggling.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction.........................................................................................................................1

II. Defining Arrogance ...........................................................................................................3

III. Attributing Arrogance (As a Way to Reinforce Oppression) ........................................13

IV. Beautiful Arrogance .......................................................................................................20

V. Conclusion ......................................................................................................................29

WORKS CITED .......................................................................................................................32
I. Introduction

On September 1st, 2016, NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick began a nationwide protest by taking a knee during the ceremonial pre-game performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” While he has come under fire for protesting in this manner, by the time the NFL season started later that month, eleven other players had joined him. Solidarity protests grew quickly across many different sports and leagues (both professional and amateur), yet many of the responses to Kaepernick’s initial act have been negative. Among the claims made against him, one in particular has stood out: Kaepernick is arrogant.

People from a wide range of different political and social outlooks including former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, Bay Area columnist Lowell Cohn, and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg have charged Kaepernick with arrogance. Despite these regular attributions, there is nothing about Kaepernick’s refusal to stand during the national anthem that is obviously arrogant. Even pre-philosophically, arrogance seems to denote a certain character trait or outlook that one is “the best” or at the very least “better than most.” But wanting to use one’s social capital to draw attention to instances of injustice does not shout, “I’m the best.” Kaepernick being called arrogant is just one instance of what seems to me a much larger pattern.

President Barack Obama has been called arrogant for myriad reasons, and while some criticisms are fair as criticisms, none seem to reflect an arrogant attitude. Latino/a and other

1 For more information and a timeline of Kaepernick’s protest see, Mark Sandritter, “A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick’s National Anthem Protest and the Athletes Who Joined Him.”

2 For more on Huckabee’s comments see, Hoffman; for Cohn’s see, Smith; and for Ginsburg’s see, Levitz. Ginsburg later apologized for her comments saying they were “inappropriately dismissive and harsh” (de Vogue).
immigrants are often charged with arrogance while seeking U.S. citizenship. Hillary Clinton, during the 2016 primaries, was called arrogant for referring to herself as the presumptive Democrat nominee when she had a significant lead in delegates. Kanye West was denounced as arrogant when, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, he claimed that then President George W. Bush didn’t “care about black people.” Even Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in reaction to her rulings on the Supreme Court, has been called arrogant. A clear trend emerges where those who are members of historically oppressed groups have a tendency to be called arrogant when the actions in question do not clearly reflect an arrogant character. Furthermore, this occurrence is not restricted to the United States.

Take Wangari Muta Maathai—a Kenyan environmental activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. Governmental officials in Kenya called her arrogant after trying to prevent the demolition of a city park to build a new skyscraper. Maathai, through her advocacy and planning, has interwoven empowerment of women, ecological conservation, and just economic development, yet those who see her as impeding corporate goals claim that her organization, Green Belt Movement, is “subversive” and that she “hates men.” They, also, call her arrogant. But her response to their charges applies to more than just her situation; it applies to the trend of attributing arrogance I have noted as a whole. She states, “They can’t stand a woman who stands up. I'm being seen as an arrogant woman because I dare to object. I call them arrogant.”

My goal in this paper is to examine the role arrogance, and attributions of arrogance, play in contexts of oppression. What is going on when people attribute arrogance to members of historically oppressed groups? What is the common thread that links these acts together, and what

---

3 This trend, it appears to me, seems largely to involve those who suffer under racism and sexism. Part of this has to do with the expectations of women and racial minorities to be subservient in various cultures. Thus, much of my discussion of arrogance refers primarily to these two groups. It is possible what I say in this paper could extend to other oppressed groups, but my focus is primarily on those aforementioned two.

4 Jane Perlez, “Nairobi Journal; Skyscraper's Enemy Draws a Daily Dose of Scorn.”
do the viewers see when people engage in these acts that make them charge arrogance? In the third section, I give three possible explanations for what is going on in these cases: two of which attend to the reasons for why the viewers may believe these people are arrogant and one that analyzes the consequences of this practice. Ultimately, it seems, that the practice comes from a misvaluing of oppressed groups, which the practice both reflects and reinforces when members from said oppressed groups protest for their equal standing in society.

In addition, I am also interested in questions about members of oppressed groups who actually are arrogant, like Muhammad Ali or Kanye West. Do we still find the attitude to be morally offensive? Are there good consequences? Could being arrogant be helpful in dealing with oppression? Could it even be a form of resistance? In the fourth section I will answer these questions arguing that one’s arrogance, in special contexts, can actually be beautiful. It can represent a healthy sense of self-worth and self-respect that sets a positive example for social group members and help one psychologically distance themselves from their oppressors.

II. Defining Arrogance

Before attending to my primary tasks of examining arrogance, and attributions of arrogance, in contexts of oppression, I need to get clearer on what I take arrogance to be. The attitude is clearly marked by a kind of superiority, but there are multiple attitudes related to superiority that need to be distinguished from one another. One such attitude occurs when one takes pleasure in a particular skill or trait, especially when one is superior to others with respect to that skill or trait. This attitude, it seems to me, is best described as pride. One is proud of one’s skills as a pianist or for having a quick wit. While such instances of superiority can be vicious or problematic, this need not always be the case. If one really is a first rate pianist, recognizing this fact and taking pleasure in proper admiration
is not, at least to me, offensive. This version of pride has come to be called “proper pride” in the philosophical literature. But consider the case of someone whose skills at piano are middle-of-the-road, or even worse, downright amateur, yet acts as if one’s abilities were first rate. Such an instance of pride would be excessive and off-putting.

On the other hand, one could have very little of this sense of superiority, making them modest. We may think of an instance where our first rate pianist is being praised and responds saying, “Thank you, I appreciate you saying that,” and goes on to state that he or she is no Martha Argerich, Glenn Gould, or Hélène Grimaud. Someone may say, “you’re too modest!” but still delight in the grace our pianist shows in accepting praise and recognizing her or his own inspirations. While acting in this manner clearly reflects modesty and not pride, I take it that such modesty is not at odds with proper pride. There are cases, however, where our pianist may really be too modest—or perhaps some damaging attitude similar to modesty. Consider the case where she or he gives a magnificent performance of some particularly difficult piece, then afterwards goes on about every little mistake made. Perhaps this pianist is just a neurotic perfectionist. But even in that case, we may find that one’s perfectionism has gotten in the way of properly enjoying one’s talents. This kind of modesty may even be a sign of low self-esteem.

One’s self-esteem, and, I believe, self-confidence, is directly tied to these various attitudes. After all, one’s superiority seems to positively correlate with one’s self-esteem. If one is proud of one’s accomplishments in a certain area, whether it is music or philosophy, one tends to have a certain amount of confidence going into one’s next project. Self-esteem, I take it, is a kind of pre-requisite to more adventurous endeavors. Pride then may be one source of self-confidence or positive self-esteem. But, like our pianist who focuses on mistakes during a performance, if one does not think highly about one’s abilities, it will be difficult to have the courage to dive into the next project with expectations of success.
The attitudes of humility and arrogance seem similar to those of pride and modesty. One way of demarcating the difference between these sets of attitudes is by the difference in the objects of those attitudes. Consider the difference between modesty and humility. Where the modest pianist lacks a certain sense of superiority or esteem with regards to playing the piano, this fact does not alter one’s sense of self. One can quite easily think there is much to improve on with regards to the piano and not doubt that one deserves respect. But those who are humble, specifically those who are far too humble, take any lack of abilities or traits as a sign that they are of little importance. Again, one’s humility can come in degrees. In one case humility can be refreshing and pleasant but in the other it can be a sign of an objectionable lack of self-esteem. The term ‘humility’, does after all, share the Latin root humiliis with the word ‘humiliation’. It is this more objectionable form of humility that is a possible explanation for our second pianist who focuses on her or his errors after performing.

The same demarcation works for distinguishing arrogance and pride. While the proud pianist is proud of her abilities at playing the piano, the arrogant infers from her abilities or traits that she is a better person. This notion of being a better person is admittedly vague, but I believe it can be clarified. It may be said of arrogant people that they consider themselves, or are disposed to consider themselves, to be more important than others. Perhaps if they were the subject of a typical ethical thought experiment involving mad doctors, lifeboats, or runaway transit vehicles, they would argue—or at least secretly think that—you ought to save them over the “average” person. Or maybe they are like Jane Krakowski’s character on the sitcom 30 Rock, who once when entering a room announced, “Listen up fives, a ten is speaking!” This particularly absurd, though humorous, example may actually tell us more about arrogance than at first glance.

---

5 Throughout the paper I will discuss the arrogant as mostly believing themselves to be more important, though it may be more accurate at times to think they are disposed to thinking themselves as more important, since the belief (1) may not be consciously recognized and (2) may not be omnipresent throughout all dealings with others.
I take it that one of the primary features of arrogance is that it creates an interpersonal hierarchy. While we can often differentiate arrogance from pride by distinguishing between the objects they take on, a vital part of arrogance is how it alters one’s perception of others. Part of believing that you are a particularly great person is to believe that others are worse than you. Thus, when making relationships, the arrogant have a sense of whether or not they are better or worse than the people they are interacting with—effectively creating a ranking where many turn out to be lower. Krakowski’s 30 Rock character, then, is just making explicit something all arrogant people do.

This interpersonal hierarchy, however, does not clarify in what sense the arrogant person believes oneself to be superior. A possible answer is that the arrogant person believes oneself to be morally superior. When making the inference from some particularly laudatory ability or trait one possesses to one’s overall worth, the arrogant believes that ability or trait makes one a more virtuous person. Some people are, after all, more virtuous than others. Eleanor Roosevelt is clearly more virtuous than Richard Spencer—a U.S. white nationalist who has called for “peaceful ethnic cleansing.” But this understanding of arrogance is confused. I do not take it that the arrogant are necessarily concerned with virtue or being virtuous.

Consider the arrogant doctor who is one of the best—or perhaps even the best—doctors at a particular hospital. She may find herself walking down the halls looking down on her various colleagues, noting how smart she is in comparison to them, or whether or not they have saved as many patients she has. She may take this to show how she’s more important to the hospital and therefore deserves an intern or assistant to help her with the more menial aspects of being a doctor—paperwork and the like. While she does think it is important that doctors give back, such

---


7 Valerie Tiberius and John D. Walker defend a view of arrogance that makes its interpersonal nature central (381). My own conception of arrogance is largely influenced by their view.

8 See, “‘Hail Trump!’: White Nationalists Salute the President-Elect.”
norms simply do not apply to her. When she does interact with patients she is often short with them: dismissing their concerns and caring little about being personable. She believes her expertise warrants significantly more pay for less work and less time. Such a doctor would be a paradigm of arrogance, but not of any of the typical virtues such as generosity. Therefore, I take it, that the arrogant person does not conceive of herself as being a morally better person, but as a person who has more importance. The distinction between the two is important.

Those who are particularly virtuous, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, to some extent, are morally better people. Despite her virtuous character, Roosevelt (or any other virtuous person) is of no more importance, from a moral point of view, than anyone else. As Jeremy Bentham wrote, “everybody to count for one, and nobody for more than one.” Morally speaking, no one is more important than anyone else—whether or not one’s actions precipitate moral praise or blame. Giving an interpersonal ranking of one’s relations, as the arrogant do, effectively denies this principle by thinking, “No, I really am more important than some people.”

Having such an attitude is morally offensive and allows us to see why arrogance is thought of as both a description of one’s attitude and a negative moral evaluation of that attitude—what has been called a “thick” moral concept. That is, arrogance is a moral vice. While I will go on to argue that arrogance is not always morally vicious, it should be clear to see why in most cases the attitude

---

9 Stephen Darwall, in “Two Kinds of Respect,” makes a distinction between recognition respect and appraisal respect. The former is the kind of respect owed to all persons in virtue of being persons (38). The latter is the kind of respect owed to those due to the qualities of their character, and is therefore only owed to some (39). My own distinction is roughly similar where those who think of themselves as morally better would believe themselves to be owed appraisal respect for their moral qualities. The arrogant though, believing they are more important, expect recognition respect, either in greater degree than others or instead of others.

10 Attributed to Bentham by John Stuart Mill in chapter five of Utilitarianism.

11 That is to say, one can be unworthy of respect, but morally still be owed respect. Again, this plays on the distinction in Darwall between recognition and appraisal respect. For more on whether respect is earned see Thomas E. Hill, Jr.’s “Must Respect Be Earned?” and Richard Dean’s “Respect for the Unworthy.”
should be taken as a vice. In thinking one has more importance, one is looking down on others instead of giving them the respect they are due. While certain attributes such as the virtuousness of one’s character, or the skills and talents of scientists, doctors, or artists may at times warrant a certain level of esteem, none of this is to say that they are, from a moral point of view, more important.

As I alluded to before, arrogance can often be characterized as an inference from one’s laudable traits or talents to one’s overall importance. I should note that arrogance is not a faulty belief about one’s traits and talents, nor is that what is morally objectionable about the attitude—that is, arrogance is not essentially epistemic. It is specifically the disposition to think one is more important than others that both constitutes arrogance and makes it objectionable. One reason why is that the arrogant may not actually be wrong about their laudable traits or talents. Muhammad Ali, for example, really was the greatest boxer—and the same follows for many people who are arrogant. What is faulty is the inference from that belief about one’s traits and talents, to one’s importance. Furthermore, arrogance does not always originate in this way.

It is quite easy to imagine a person who has had many economic and familial advantages in life and thus be brought up with this kind of arrogant attitude, which then leads to an inference that one is particularly good at myriad things. Unfortunately, there is far too much to say about this particular origin of arrogance and is best left for another paper. That being said, the inference from particularly good traits or talents to one’s importance may give us insight into another way arrogance functions: it may come in both local and global varieties.

Consider, for example, the rapper Kanye West. A prominent DJ in the Hip Hop community once expressed surprise to West when he found out that West had produced the beat behind Ludacris’ single “Stand Up,” since it was a significant departure from West’s previous work. West simply responded by saying, “Whenever you hear a dope beat I should be the first person you think
of.” Given my previous comments about pride and arrogance being differentiated by the object they take on—a particular trait or skill in the case of pride and the person as a whole in the case of arrogance—this example may seem more a case of excessive pride than arrogance. However, there is a blatantly arrogant characteristic to this statement.

West is placing other hip-hop producers beneath him, implying that he is of significantly more importance and deserves a special kind of esteem. Others may be producing *dope beats*, but he should be the first person thought of whenever one is heard. This case may be one where excessive pride and arrogance bleed into each other. I will call this *local arrogance* because one’s arrogance is being localized to a particular domain.

Thinking back to the arrogant doctor example, as it was set up, there is nothing to rule out that the doctor’s arrogance is local—only applying in the context of the hospital. She may be perfectly generous, personable, and humble in other contexts. However, it is also easy to believe that this doctor’s arrogance extends far beyond the limits of her profession. She may find volunteering at her child’s school unnecessary given her worth and importance. Or, perhaps, she talks down to service staff at stores and restaurants since they simply do not stack up. She pays closer attention to the thoughts and perspectives of her friends who are also top-tier doctors, while her friends who work in other industries get less of this respect. In this case, the doctor exhibits what I would like to call *global arrogance*.

It is important to note that local arrogance can be localized around any aspect of the arrogant person’s identity. The locally arrogant doctor most easily is understood as the doctor who is arrogant only in contexts of the hospital. She is arrogant *qua* doctor. But she could also be arrogant


13 It may actually be the case that Kanye West’s arrogance is more global, but his particularly reflective nature on his ego and ability to discuss his shortcomings gives me pause to decide either way.
qua amateur chess champion or qua parent volunteer (or even qua white, black, or what-have-you—but more on this later). Furthermore, the origin of her arrogance may still be coming from the fact that she is a particularly accomplished doctor, despite the arrogance being localized around some other part of her identity. Perhaps while at the hospital she is not arrogant at all, but when she volunteers at her child’s school she looks down on the other parents. Just because one is locally arrogant, does not mean that the particular trait or skill that the arrogance originates from is the domain in which the arrogance is localized around.

Whether one’s arrogance is local or global does not alone alter the moral inappropriateness of the attitude. What is it to those who are being denied respect that one is giving respect to others when outside the context they share with the arrogant person? The answer is, and should be, “nothing.” To think one is more important than others is to still deny them the respect they are due as persons, and thus morally problematic. While I find that nothing more needs to be said in order to find arrogance morally offensive, the attitude may often have morally undesirable consequences that are important to consider.

Given the beliefs arrogant people are committed to regarding their higher status, it should be easy to see the arrogant as not caring what others, whom they see as lower, believe. The opinions of those who do not stack up may be of no concern to them. But just as it is easy to see the arrogant dismissing the thoughts of others outright, it should also be of no surprise that they would ask that this status be recognized with esteem and deference. If the arrogant take actions against others to exact esteem and deference, this will likely result in those people being mistreated and demeaned.14

A further consequence of arrogance is how it may inhibit valuable relationships and self-knowledge. Given arrogance’s offensive nature, it would not be the most attractive feature of a person. Not many self-respecting people would put effort into cultivating a rich relationship with

---

14 Bell talks more about this in Hard Feelings when discussing “superbia”; however, she believes that these actions come from a necessary desire to gain esteem and deference (114-115).
someone who is constantly looking down on them; much less find that attitudinal disposition attractive in the first place. As it stands, it is not always an easy thing to find people you can have a true friendship with. This unattractive attitude then acts as a way to shrink that already small group. Furthermore, we have only considered those who would want to be friends with the arrogant person, not whom the arrogant person would find worthy of their time. The arrogant person’s interpersonal ranking of others will cause them to find fewer people worthy candidates for their friendship (or other valuable relationships). So, while it is not impossible for those who are arrogant to build strong, valuable relationships, it is notably harder.

Granting that the arrogant person’s friendships will be fewer or, perhaps, less strong, one stands to lose access to self-knowledge. One of the best ways to gain knowledge of the self is via our friends. I take it that one’s own self-perception is not always the most accurate indicator since it can be distorted by a number of cares, concerns, insecurities, or attitudes (arrogance and humility being such attitudes that can distort our self-perception). Our closest friends however have ample evidence of how we act and react in a number of situations, and while still biased in our favor, can give us vital insight into our character. It is probably not very hard for you to think of a situation in which a friend has pulled you aside and asked if you realized that you have a tendency to be rude to certain people, ignore certain people, smile at certain people, or what-have-you. If one lacks a significant number of these relationships, or the relationships are stinted in such a way that they do

---

15 Tiberius and Walker make this argument as well, though they only consider those whom the arrogant person would find worthy and not those who would want to be friends with someone who is arrogant (386). Furthermore, their view is based on reciprocal friendships, which I do not believe are the only ones of value. Bell makes similar arguments against the reciprocal aspect of Tiberius and Walker’s account in her book *Hard Feelings* (112-113).
not feel comfortable informing their arrogant friend of this information, one is at a significant
disadvantage in gaining the important information necessary for developing oneself.\footnote{16}

I have given what we could take as a working definition of arrogance as an attitude marked
by superiority where one thinks one is a more important person than others. Thus, the arrogant
create an interpersonal ranking that force one’s various relationships into an interpersonal hierarchy.
Arrogance can often be differentiated from similar attitudes like pride by taking note of the
difference in object. However, these differences between pride and arrogance can be blurred with
more local forms of arrogance, as opposed to global arrogance. Both are morally problematic since
they involve looking down on others, which denies them a fundamental kind of respect they are due
as persons. Before moving on to examining arrogance in special contexts like oppression, it is
important to briefly distinguish it from one other attitude I have briefly mentioned: self-confidence.

As I stated previously, I believe self-confidence, and self-esteem,\footnote{17} are directly tied to these
attitudes of pride, modesty, arrogance, and humility. Extreme forms of modesty and humility will
often be marked by a significant lack of confidence, whereas one who takes proper pride in one’s
work will find that confidence comes much easier and be able to launch into new projects with
expectations of success. Similarly, arrogance may also lead to significant levels of confidence.
However, I do not think that everyone who has self-confidence or shows one’s self-confidence is
arrogant or necessarily proud. While pride and arrogance often lead to self-confidence, I do not
think that being confident leads one to be proud or arrogant. Especially given various contexts of
oppression, I believe it is dangerous for us to infer from one’s confidence that they are either proud

\footnote{16 Again, Tiberius and Walker make this argument, but consider a narrow set of cases, namely only
the interpersonal ranking case, and not the case where the inhibition comes from having fewer and
weaker friendships (387).}

\footnote{17 I should note that I think self-esteem positively and negatively correlates with arrogance and
humility respectively, and less so with pride and modesty given those attitudes’ relation to particular
traits and skills. However, all four seem to be related to self-confidence, though the scope of what
one is confident (or lacks confidence) in will alter depending on the locality of the attitude.}
or arrogant. Confidence can be a consequence of arrogance that deserves attention but it alone should not be taken as evidence of arrogance.

III. Attributing Arrogance (As a Way to Reinforce Oppression)

With an account of arrogance on the table, it would be beneficial to go over at least one of the cases I began with in more detail. Let us take the case of Colin Kaepernick not standing during the U.S. national anthem. According to Kaepernick, he was attempting to bring attention to racial injustice in America. Kaepernick told reporters that he was “not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.”18 He saw that he had a platform as a professional athlete to publicize these issues and create a conversation about how people of color are treated in America. The act, then, was an act of protest—an assertion of his and other people of color’s worth as equals, not an assertion of his being more important than others.

In order to try and make sense of viewing Kaepernick as arrogant, let us consider a different but similar hypothetical case where a football player refuses to stand during the national anthem. When reporters ask this player why he did not stand—as they did Kaepernick—he simply replies, “I didn’t want to. I see why people do it, but it isn’t really worth my effort.” Unlike Kaepernick’s response, this response seems to reflect an arrogant attitude. Standing during the national anthem is of very little cost to someone and is a norm that shows respect for one’s country (or at least the country in which the game takes place) and applies equally to all participants. In stating that he both recognized why people stand and that it was not worth his effort, this counts as evidence that he actually sees himself as above the law (or at any rate above the norm). In thinking this norm does

18 As quoted by Sandritter in “A timeline of Colin Kaepernick's national anthem protest and the athletes who joined him.”
not apply to him he is setting himself apart from those “average” people to whom the norm does apply, thus reflecting an arrogant attitude.

This “above the law” explanation could potentially be applied to Kaepernick’s case. While not as blatant as the case in which the football player merely did not want to stand, it may be that those calling Kaepernick arrogant are thinking he sees himself as above the law (norm) by protesting in this manner. Indeed, some have made the argument that while Kaepernick has a right to protest, he should not do so in a way that disrespects the United States. The answer to whether or not Kaepernick should protest is completely irrelevant with regards to the matter of whether his actions reflect an arrogant attitude. It is entirely possible that the argument against Kaepernick is a good one and taking a knee during the national anthem is an objectionable form of protest. But the appropriateness of one’s protest has nothing to do with arrogance. One does not need to think she or he is more important than others in order to protest, nor does protesting reflect an attitude of more importance. Furthermore, protests often do involve breaking some norm in order to get attention—just think of Martin Luther King Jr. blocking a highway on his march to Montgomery. This point is clearer when looking at the case of the immigrant protestors.

In November of 2015, high skilled immigrants were rallying in front of the White House to bring attention to the difficulty of maintaining or gaining their documented status due to the backlog on green cards. This remained a significant problem despite executive orders President Obama made the previous year. Some protestors had signs stating “undocumented and not backing down.”

---

19 Conservative political commentator Tomi Lahren makes this argument while discussing Kaepernick’s protest with Trevor Noah on The Daily Show—see, “Tomi Lahren and Trevor Noah discuss Colin Kaepernick’s protest.”

20 While I cannot find any evidence of this, I would not be surprised if segregationists at the time called King arrogant for these protests.
protesters were then charged with having “brazen arrogance.”21 It is hard to read their more typical form of protest of picketing as being objectionable or that they believe they are “above the law” for wanting better treatment. People do not protest because they think they are more important than others, but because they want equal treatment as others.

While protesting has nothing to do with arrogance, it does have to do with other self-regarding attitudes, such as self-respect—making the act of protesting the unifying feature of these cases I am examining.22 When one protests one is asserting one’s self-respect and making a claim that she or he has rights that ought to be respected. All the cases I am interested in involve historically oppressed people’s “rising above their station,” making a call for equal rights. Therefore, I take it, they are all protesting. Thus, to think they are acting “above the law” (or norm), and are therefore arrogant, is to misunderstand what a protest is. It is an assertion of one’s equality.

Understanding these cases as cases of protest leads to a second possible explanation. The people calling for equality, according to the viewer, are not equal, but lower than others. While it is beneficial as a moral theorist to understand arrogance as one being disposed to believe oneself more important than others, perhaps this working definition is not adequate for understanding how people use the term in these contexts. Perhaps they understand the arrogant person to believe oneself to be more important than one actually is. On this revised definition, those accusing others of arrogance do not take the person to be reflecting an attitude of being “above the law” or being


22 To quote Bernard Boxill’s “Self-Respect and Protest”:

Therefore, since nothing as unequivocally expresses what a person thinks he believes as his own emphatic statement, the powerless but self-respecting person will declare his self-respect. He will protest. His protest affirms that he has rights. More important, it tells everyone that he believes he has rights and that he therefore claims self-respect. When he has to endure wrongs he cannot repel and feels his self-respect threatened, he will publicly claim it in order to reassure himself that he has it. His reassurance does not come from persuading others that he has self-respect. It comes from using his claim to self-respect as a challenge. (69)
more important than others, but an attitude of being equal to others. The viewer, apparently, takes this to be wrong. Therefore, they are arrogant because they take themselves to be more important than they actually are based on the values of the perceiver.

Surely, if we asked those attributing arrogance to protestors, they would not say the people protesting are less important. They would, no doubt, affirm the equality of all people. But I believe they would do this while undervaluing those protesting. This conflict is a common effect of oppression.\(^{23}\) The undervaluing of groups of people—coming from systems of oppression—is taught to others thereby perpetuating the oppression and privileges of various groups. Often, this undervaluing constitutes a far more subtle and implicit set of judgments and attitudes we carry underneath a more explicit belief in equality.\(^{24}\) We may honestly believe all are equal, while still reflecting a value set in our actions and intentions that shows that we think otherwise. It is then possible for one to have an explicit belief that all people are equal while still valuing others as less and taking calls for equality as calls for more than one deserves. In calling oppressed people arrogant, one may be both reflecting and perpetuating this way of valuing others and seeing some as lower.

Recall Wangari Muta Maathai’s response to being called ‘arrogant,’ “They can’t stand a woman who stands up. I’m being seen as an arrogant woman because I dare to object. I call them

---

\(^{23}\) Marilyn Frye’s discussions of the double-bind women face in her essay “Oppression” and of anger in her essay “A Note on Anger” (both found in *The Politics of Reality*) are examples of how one can be formally committed to equality while still treating other groups in a way that denies them value. Similarly, Christopher Lebron argues that racial oppression will often have the effect of a “moral disadvantage” for those who privilege from said oppression. This moral disadvantage may manifest as “racial or racist beliefs that play a non-trivial role in judgment and reasoning but are not necessarily intentional or consciously mobilized in forms of reasoning” (64). This particular point is also explored by Charles Mills in his paper “White Ignorance.”

\(^{24}\) This is one of the claims made and explored by Christopher Lebron in *The Color of Our Shame* regarding treatment of black Americans in the United States. Essentially, despite having formal and legal equality in the United States, black Americans still experience a lower social value, which is promoted and perpetuated by various institutions that are “continuous in morally problematic ways” with the United States’ more explicitly racist past (124). Similarly, I believe this often follows with regard to our own individual attitudes toward oppressed peoples as well.
arrogant.” This response largely sums up this second possible explanation. Those viewing oppressed people as arrogant do not find their calls for equality to be justified, and thus see the protestors rising above their stations as arrogant. In doing so, they are reflecting a particular set of values where some (themselves) are more important than others (the people they call arrogance). In this way, they reflect something like arrogance as I defined it in the previous section of this paper. They are internalizing the social hierarchy and letting it dictate their interpersonal relations to others, seeing themselves as more important than those whom society has cast in a lower station. To them, this may seem justified and not arrogant since they take themselves to be exactly as important as they actually are. But the unequal value system they reflect is part of what it is to be arrogant.

One may believe there is some equivocation going on here with how I understand arrogance. On one hand I am saying that thinking one is more important than one actually is, is how we should understand arrogance. On the other hand, I am saying that thinking, or being disposed to think, one is more important than others is how we should understand arrogance. The charge against me, then, would be that I am defining how one group of people seems to understand arrogance, and then using a different conception of arrogance to call them arrogant. But note the relationship between the two definitions. If one takes all people to be of the same worth—as I believe we should—then thinking oneself to be more important than others just is thinking oneself to be more important than one actually is. It simply is not true, from a moral point of view, that anyone is more important than anyone else. The kind of misvaluing that causes those accusing oppressed people of arrogance is a constitutive part of being arrogant.25

25 Those viewers attributing arrogance to protestors do not reflect the attitude of arrogance in the ordinary way we think about it, despite their misvaluing of oppressed peoples. Their arrogance may be more similar to what Marilyn Frye has called “the arrogant eye” in her essay, “In and Out of Harm’s Way: Arrogance and Love,” in The Politics of Reality. However, fleshing out the similarities between her account and my position goes beyond the scope of my paper.
Finally, I would like to turn to a third possible explanation. However, this is an explanation of a different kind. The first two explanations largely have to do with the underlying attitudes and beliefs used to justify the viewer attributing arrogance in these special cases. This third explanation is one that is trying to understand what the consequences are when someone calls an oppressed person arrogant, without any reflection of the attitude of arrogance. Thus, I do not take it to be incompatible with either of the two explanations I have already given.

The general pattern to these special cases I am looking at is oppressed peoples rising above their station, asserting their self-respect, and putting forth a claim for equal rights and moral consideration—that is, they are protesting. The viewer in this situation, in calling them arrogant, is deflecting attention away from the content of their protest toward a negative evaluation of the protestor’s character. In effect, the viewer is refusing to give that person uptake.

Let me pause so that I can elaborate on what I understand uptake to be and what happens when it is denied. Consider this example given by Marilyn Frye:

[A woman] had gone to some trouble to adjust the carburetor on her car and shortly thereafter an attendant at a gas station started monkeying with it. She was dismayed and sharply told him to stop [given the delicate and often frustrating job of getting a carburetor properly adjusted]. He became very agitated and yelled at her, calling her a crazy bitch.26

As Frye notes, the attendant could have had many other responses, such as asking why he should not touch it, defensively claiming he was only looking at it, or that she had adjusted it wrong and he was fixing it. Any of these responses would be to “take her anger on” and respond to the “claims implicit in it.” But in calling the woman a “crazy bitch” he deflected attention away from the claims her anger made, and focused attention on her character and sanity—things completely irrelevant to whether or not he should be adjusting her carburetor. He denied her uptake.

Denying someone uptake involves a person first making some kind of claim that a second party ought to recognize and, second, someone from that second party responding with something

irrelevant to that claim. The irrelevant response then deflects attention from that initial claim onto something else—in both of the above cases, that person’s character. This move is a way to silence someone or some group and reinforce a practice where claims from that group need not be taken on.\(^\text{27}\) In the case of calling someone ‘arrogant’ a practice is being reinforced where we do not need to listen to calls for equality, and instead see these acts as a reflection of a protestor’s arrogance. 

One may object stating that surely not every instance of these special cases is one of purposefully trying to deflect attention away from one’s protest by criticizing the person’s character. This claim seems reasonable enough to me, but it does not matter for the overall problem of reinforcing oppression. Oppression is largely constituted by unintentional actions that present barriers and pressures to minimize those who are oppressed.\(^\text{28}\) Even if one is not consciously attempting to deflect attention from the content of a protest, they are effectively doing as much, and still sending a signal that it is permissible for others to do the same. Given the number of cases I began with, there is evidence that such a practice exists where the charge of arrogance is used as a way to deny oppressed people uptake when calling for equality.

Attributions of arrogance to people from oppressed groups when engaging in protest, then, both reflect and reinforce the oppression of those people. First, the attributions are a reflection of the way oppressed groups are valued as lower and, second, they reinforce a practice where we deny the content of those protests uptake. Given that attributions of arrogance function differently in these specific contexts, perhaps our moral evaluation alters when those who are oppressed actually

\(^{27}\) Part of how I understand reinforcement of oppression is via acts that set up what have been called “permissibility rules” by Mary Kate McGowan in her paper “Oppressive Speech.” One example she gives is how one’s derogatory usage of the term ‘bitch’ in a particular context can signal that it is okay to call women ‘bitches’ in that context, effectively implying that women do not deserve the same level of respect. Given the undervaluing of oppressed people in society at large, oppressive (speech) acts are ways to further show that it is permissible in various contexts to hold that valuation and deny oppressed people respect.

\(^{28}\) See, Marilyn Frye’s “Oppression” in The Politics of Reality.
are arrogant. It may be that even if the person really is arrogant, charges of arrogance may still reinforce oppression. Kanye West seems to be a good example of this. He is clearly arrogant, but his statement that “Bush doesn’t care about black people,” is not an example of his arrogance, and charging him with arrogance is merely a way to deflect attention from his claim. Perhaps there is something in arrogance itself, that when present in a person who faces oppression alters the attitude’s moral evaluation. I turn my attention to this issue in the final section and argue that our evaluation of the attitude should change. Arrogance in the oppressed, when localized, cannot only be good, all things considered, but also beautiful.

IV. Beautiful Arrogance

“I am the greatest!” Muhammad Ali proclaimed right before fighting heavyweight champion Sonny Liston as a seven to one underdog. While he went on to beat Sonny Liston, his pre-game speech showed a significant level of confidence that may not have been warranted at the time despite his performance against Liston. Throughout his career he made many more statements that lead me to think he was not just confident, but also arrogant. Consider, for example, “I’m young, I’m handsome, I’m fast, I’m pretty, and can’t possibly be beaten,” as well as, “I’m as confident as I say, and I’m better than I say I am.”

He clearly thought very highly of himself and made sure others knew it. Upon changing his name from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali, after converting to Islam, Floyd Patterson, a rival boxer and former heavyweight champion, refused to call him anything other than Cassius. Before the two fought, Floyd claimed the fight was, “a crusade to reclaim the title from the Black Muslims. As a

29 For an analysis and defense of Kanye West’s statement please see the beginning of Christopher Lebron’s chapter “Shame and Method” in The Color of Our Shame.
Catholic I am fighting Clay as a patriotic duty. I am going to return the crown to America.”

Ali’s response was to drag the fight out to nine rounds, pummeling Patterson and shouting, “Come on, white America… What’s my name? Is my name Clay? What’s my name, fool?”

As a member of the Nation of Islam, many black civil rights leaders during the time wanted to distance themselves from Ali. However, they found his charisma and energy infectious and when he put his heavyweight champion title and money on the line by refusing to fight in the Vietnam War, he started being seen as someone with moral character. He donated large sums of money to educate black children, stopped a major gang conflict in Chicago, and arguably united anti-segregationists and Black Nationalists in America. He was widely respected by Civil Rights leaders, including Mississippi organizer Lawrence Guyot who said this of Ali:

We were down there in these small, hot, dusty towns, in an atmosphere thick with fear, trying to organize folk whose grandparents were slaves. A town where you had the Klan on one side, the local sheriff’s department on the other, and more than a little intermingling between the two. And here was this beautifully arrogant young man who made us proud to be us and proud to fight for our rights. (Ezra 121-122, emphasis mine)

Muhammad Ali was arrogant, but he was beautifully arrogant. In this final section, I will flesh out this notion of beautiful arrogance to show that when properly localized and in contexts of oppression arrogance is not morally vicious but, all things considered, good.

In typical instances, arrogance is morally offensive because from a moral point of view everyone is of equal importance and yet the arrogant take themselves to be more important. Arrogance simply is taking oneself to be more important than one actually is, and therefore more important than others. However, I will argue, in contexts of oppression this attitude may not be

---

30 Patterson as quoted by Zirin in his discussion about the Patterson vs. Ali fight (63-64).

31 Ali’s comment “Come on, white America…” shows, according to Zirin, that he believed Floyd Patterson was aligning himself with white, Christian interests by refusing to call him ‘Muhammad Ali,’ though Patterson was also black (63-64).

32 For more on his influence and acts during the Civil Rights Movement, see Ezra’s chapter titled “Carving Out Moral Authority” in *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.
morally offensive. That is to say, it is not morally bad or vicious. I do not take this to mean, though, that arrogance then becomes a moral virtue. Instead the attitude of arrogance, in these contexts, has a neutral moral evaluation and even brings about morally and socially favorable consequences, though, in addition to this morally neutral evaluation, it has a certain kind of attractiveness, which makes it beautiful. In this way, beautiful arrogance is, on the overall evaluation of the attitude, good and is something that can be cultivated as an act of resistance against oppression.

I take it that the beauty comes from the kind of expectations we have as viewers. Due to the barriers and pressures that come from oppression, those who are oppressed often suffer their oppression psychologically. People who are oppressed in this way often learn that the way they emote will often be challenged as something inappropriate—just consider the cases I began this paper with or Marilyn Frye’s example of the woman and her carburetor. Due to these factors, people who are oppressed often can recognize their worth intellectually, but do not feel their worth. That is, they may recognize that they deserve self-respect, but not feel like they have it.

This “primordial interpretation of self and self-worth,” is what Robin Dillon has labeled basal self-respect, which is, “the prereflective, unarticulated, emotionally laden” form of self-respect and “the invisible lens through which everything connected with the self is viewed and presumed to be disclosed.” Those who are oppressed, according to Dillon, can often have damaged basal self-respect, marking a lack of self-worth and inhibiting their ability to live out virtuous lives. Thus, if

33 For example, Sandra Bartky in “On Psychological Oppression” (in Femininity and Domination) argues that psychological oppression forces the oppressed to become their own oppressors, making “the work of domination easier by breaking the spirit of the dominated and by rendering them incapable of understanding the nature of those agencies responsible for their subjugation” (23). Effectively, she is “weighed down” in her mind and has “harsh dominion exercised over [her] self-esteem” (22). Robin Dillon, in “Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political,” similarly refers to the psychological effect as having “damaged basal self-respect”—more on this soon (241). And as previously mentioned, Christopher Lebron talks about the psychological effects of oppression, as they relate to virtue and the good life, on both the oppressed and the privileged in The Color of Our Shame.

basal self-respect marks one’s feeling of self-worth, then the arrogant have an excess of this self-respect.

But given their position as being members of an oppressed group, attaining this excess of basal self-respect is remarkable. Where so many are pressured into servility, and so few are able to achieve a feeling of self-worth, the beautifully arrogant are rich in it and stand as exemplars of self-respect—a truly beautiful sight. The beautifully arrogant have overcome the oppressive barriers to self-respect and then some. But there is a question of how, given these barriers to self-respect, one could be so rich in basal self-respect. How do they become arrogant in the first place? Remember the typical route I noted previously: one makes an inference from one’s laudable traits or talents to one’s overall importance. It is through their traits and talents that the arrogant find their importance and worth. It should be of no surprise, then, that some of the people I have been focusing on in this account of beautiful arrogance are athletes, rappers, or musicians. People that really are the masters of their craft, and, perhaps, because of that skill, have basal self-respect.

There is no doubt that this is not the ideal way in which oppressed peoples discover their self-worth and moral importance. It would be much better to dismantle the structural injustices that impede one’s moral development. But in these non-ideal circumstances, I believe those who are oppressed should take advantage of any resources they have in order to discover their moral worth. The faulty inference, in such cases, seems less faulty. And having overcome their skewed self-perception, the beautifully arrogant can then serve as a positive representation of healthy basal self-

---

35 Christopher Lebron argues that those who are black Americans face an ethical disadvantage where they are unable to develop preferred values (like those of personal excellence and self-respect) and how to live the good life (13). I believe this could equally apply to many people who find themselves oppressed in similar ways (being given less importance in the social hierarchy). Lebron suggests that the typical avenues for developing virtue are closed off for the oppressed (104). I agree with Lebron’s analysis and believe this suggests that alternative routes to developing basal self-respect are important, especially given Dillon’s claim in “Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political,” that basal self-respect underlies the more robust forms of self-respect that are important for leading an ethical life (241).
respect for others in one’s community who find their basal self-respect still damaged. I take it that this positive representation is what Lawrence Guyot was referring to when he said Ali was a “beautifully arrogant young man who made us proud to be us and proud to fight for our rights.”

On the other hand, one may think that what is beautiful is not the excess—that is, not the arrogance—but the self-respect despite the arrogance. Arrogance, regardless of context, is still, ultimately, morally problematic because it does not give proper respect to persons. So, while people like Muhammad Ali may have been and continue to be inspirational, it is because of the self-respect and not because of the arrogance. In effect, those who argue this line would think that if one had an adequate amount of self-respect without the arrogance, one would be even more beautiful. This view, I take it, is held due to the arrogant not only raising themselves up, but also looking down on others.

Putting the moral evaluation of looking down on others to the side for a moment, I really do believe that the looking down on oppressors, specifically, is part of what makes the beautifully arrogant, beautiful. As stated previously, one potential upshot of being disposed to think yourself as better than others is that you may seek the esteem and deference you believe owed to you. Typically this behavior is repulsive and morally offensive. But when the tables are turned, and the oppressed person looks down on their oppressor who has tried to minimize them on the basis of one’s race, gender, or what-have-you, it is powerful. Consider again the example of Muhammad Ali fighting Floyd Patterson, pummeling Patterson for nine rounds shouting, “What’s my name? Is my name Clay? What’s my name, fool?” It is precisely these acts that typically reflect an arrogant attitude, which are so appealing when taken up by those who have been oppressed. There is something in the swagger of the arrogant that we find beautiful, not something we would rather have absent.
This may just be a case where we love the bad and not give a damn. As Vida Yao argues, sometimes we just love the badness in people because they reflect an all too human nature.\textsuperscript{36} Given our love of the way human nature can be expressed through our behavior and character, we may not only love people despite their badness, but the badness may actually ground or enhance our love for them. Perhaps arrogance, then, is just a kind of badness that we cannot help but love since it reflects an all too human proclivity. However, if this were a case of us loving the bad and not giving a damn, then beautiful arrogance would not be so context sensitive. It is clear that in most contexts we do not love arrogance, but find it morally offensive. It is only in cases of oppression, that it seems possible to find the attitude attractive, thus making it not clearly a sign of humanity that compels us to love the bad. In addition, there are also plausible cases where one is in a context of oppression and their arrogance is still not attractive—such as the arrogance reflected by Samuel L. Jackson’s character Stephen in \textit{Django Unchained}.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, it appears that beautiful arrogance has other important dimensions that limit the scope of the attitude that would alter our moral evaluation of it.

I take it that one of the necessary dimensions of beautiful arrogance is that it is \textit{local} and not \textit{global}. This disposition to think of oneself as better than others is not an all-encompassing part of their character, but focused on a kind of local area. While in some cases local arrogance is localized around a laudable character trait or skill, it can also be localized around a certain area of one’s life or a particular part of their identity. The origin of one’s arrogance does not matter in this case; what matters is whom the arrogant are looking down upon. The beautifully arrogant are most disposed to have this attitude—and look down upon others—when faced with their oppressors.

\textsuperscript{36} According to Yao, this kind of love is a secularized form of grace, which she argues for in the first chapter of “Loving the Bad and Not Giving a Damn: A Defense of Psychic Disharmony,” 18-19.

\textsuperscript{37} The character of Stephen is a black slave master and is a kind of “Uncle Tom” who recognizes that blacks are less important and is arrogant due to realizing this fact. He looks down on the other slaves and is ruthless in his dealings with them.
Consider again, Muhammad Ali. Ali’s arrogance was strikingly localized to those who showed him disrespect. He did not show the same general attitude when working with inner-city youth or when protesting the Vietnam War. Another example is during a pre-fight press conference with boxer Zora Folley. Reporters were asking Folley what name he would call his opponent—given that others, such as Patterson, would only call him Cassius—to which he responded, “Muhammad Ali.” Ali thanked Folley, calling him brother, and told the press that, “[Folley] is a quiet dignified man. I respect him for respecting me.”

Instances of beautiful arrogance are examples of arrogance that is not morally offensive or vicious. Note though that I do not think it makes arrogance virtuous. I think many good—morally and otherwise—consequences can come about from beautiful arrogance, but nothing inherent in the attitude itself makes it morally good. I do not believe it would be accurate then to call it a virtue in the same way it is considered a vice in typical contexts. Thus, when arrogance is localized in the manner I have discussed, we have a neutral moral evaluation of it. It is not offensive, but that does not mean we should conceive of beautiful arrogance as morally good or as a virtue that ought to be cultivated. The attitude, instead, is one that is good from a much wider perspective than simply the moral.

What are these good consequences that make it on the whole good? I have already mentioned one. The positive representation of basal self-respect that promotes and helps others cultivate their self-respect is one such positive consequence. The other benefits come from the typically arrogant action of looking down on others—specifically, one’s oppressors. I believe this response can serve as a kind of preemptive coping mechanism for the oppressed.

---

38 Quoted from Ezra’s discussion of Ali and Folley in *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* (134).

39 If one were to take Robin Dillon’s view in “Humility, Arrogance, and Self-Respect in Kant and Hill” where humility is a contextual, instrumental virtue, then one could easily argue that beautiful arrogance is the proper analogue. However, I am not sympathetic to this account of humility or virtue where the good features have to do with the consequences as opposed to the attitude itself.
The benefits gained by looking down on one’s oppressor are another primary aspect of beautiful arrogance. In this way, beautiful arrogance functions in much the same way as the attitude of contempt. One of the primary attributes of contempt is that it presents “its object as low in the sense of ranking low in worth as a person in virtue of falling short of some legitimate interpersonal ideal.” Contempt then can serve as a response to those in society who have cast the oppressed as low, effectively undermining the oppressors by representing oneself as higher than them. One of the ways contempt succeeds in undermining its object is by creating distance between the contemnor and the object of contempt. This psychological distancing is also present in cases of arrogance.

Consider one of the typical consequences of arrogance where one closes routes to self-knowledge. The arrogant often do not take much outsider testimony of their characters seriously. Instead, they blow it off, not seeing the value in such perspectives. In the case of beautiful arrogance, which is localized to contexts of oppression, there is little to no value in outsider perspectives. The perspectives of oppressors—regarding the characters of those who are oppressed—will almost always reinforce oppression and put in place barriers or pressures to impede one’s sense of self-worth. Thus, the psychological distancing that comes with looking down on oppressors is actually incredibly helpful and will have the opposite result from that in the typical cases of arrogance.

All that I have said so far concerns looking down as a form of self-care or coping. The psychological distancing that comes from beautiful arrogance is one way someone can cope or practice self-care when faced with oppression. A case has already been made for contempt being a feminist moral emotion that can do this work, and it seems that beautiful arrogance may just be righteous contempt. But herein lies the difference: contempt is a reactive attitude because it reacts to

---

40 Michelle Mason, “Contempt as a Moral Attitude,” 241.

41 For more on this see Macalester Bell “A Woman’s Scorn,” 89-91.

42 See Macalester Bell’s “A Woman’s Scorn” and her further treatment of contempt in *Hard Feelings.*
violations of interpersonal ideals. Beautiful arrogance, on the other hand, is preemptive. One has effectively trained oneself to ignore oppressive perspectives when navigating the world prior to any violations of interpersonal ideals. The beautifully arrogant recognize that certain perspectives are damaging and anticipate that those in similar positions of privilege will likely make similar mistakes, so they do not wait for the interpersonal ideals to be violated before mentally distancing themselves. It is in this preemptive distancing that arrogance can serve as a way of resisting one's oppression. You are not giving voice to those who will only reinforce your oppression.

The effectiveness of using arrogance toward certain ends can be seen in those who already are arrogant. Consider, again, Kanye West and what he states in his song “Last Call”:

Last year shoppin’ my demo, I was tryin’ to shine
Every motherfucker told me that I couldn’t rhyme
Now I could let these dream killers kill my self-esteem
Or use my arrogance as the steam to power my dream
I use it as my gas, so they say that I’m gassed
But without it I’d be last, so I ought to laugh
So I don’t listen to the suits behind the desk no more …
You can’t say shit to Kanye West no more

West states that it was his arrogance that kept him motivated to make music, despite many in the industry who believed he would not be successful as a rapper. His arrogance, and the attached self-confidence, helped him persevere through adversity: he kept making music despite those who told him he could not do it.

The cultivation of beautiful arrogance, especially as a form of resistance, could then come largely from doing those actions that typically reflect arrogance. That is, I do not believe the attitude needs to come first. One can, as it were, fake it until one makes it. Acting as if one is arrogant, may eventually lead to increases in one’s basal self-respect and self-confidence. Acting as if you are more important than others may lead to you actually feeling like you are better than society has valued you at because of your race or gender. Given the frequency at which oppressed people are called

arrogant, it may be effective to actually act arrogantly in order to fight back. If people are irreversibly convinced that you are arrogant, you are free to act arrogantly and use it as a tool to knock your oppressors down to size. None of this is to say that the oppressed must cultivate beautiful arrogance, but that this may be one way oppressed people can resist their oppression.

V. Conclusion

Before concluding, I would like to look back at some of the previous people I have discussed throughout the paper. I will begin with Kanye West, who is clearly arrogant, but not clearly beautifully arrogant. Kanye West is particularly reflective about his arrogance and recognizes its benefits—seemingly a good sign that he is beautifully arrogant. What is more difficult to tell, however, is whether or not his arrogance is properly localized. He has many songs where he disrespects his oppressors in a fairly arrogant fashion, but he also acts in ways that disrespect members of other oppressed groups of which he is not a member, namely, women.44

It seems, then, that his arrogance is actually global and not local. But there really is something beautiful about his arrogance when he is looking down on his oppressors, despite the moral offensiveness of it at others times. Perhaps the best way to explain this phenomenon is to understand his arrogance intersectionally: West’s arrogance qua black American is beautiful, but his arrogance qua man is vicious. While this helps to understand the descriptive claim that his arrogance is at times beautiful, it does not help with the normative claim whether or not his arrogance as a whole is still morally neutral, or if it is vicious to the point of obligating him to cultivate greater humility.

44 See, Brianna Provenzano, “Why Did Kanye West Put Rhianna Next To Her Abuser in His ‘Famous’ Music Video?”
The picture is further complicated when we remember how calling members of historically oppressed groups ‘arrogant’ can reinforce their oppression by denying their claims uptake. In calling Kanye West, or any other member of an oppressed group, ‘arrogant,’ we need to make sure we are not perpetuating a system that leaves many people oppressed. The point of giving an account of beautiful arrogance is to understand how our evaluations of attitudes can change in these contexts and offer new ways for those who are oppressed to resist, not furthering a damaging practice.

Where Kanye West is clearly arrogant, Wangari Muta Maathai is clearly not. Maathai organized women to plant trees so as to empower them, create a just source of income, and improve environmental conditions in Kenya. She was called arrogant for challenging a plan to tear down a city park in order to build a skyscraper. Her response was that she was not arrogant, but they were the arrogant ones. I find Maathai’s response to be one of self-confidence and not beautiful arrogance. She herself denies being arrogant, and her own character seems to reflect that. She is an egalitarian through and through, but one with confidence and proper pride to challenge her oppressors head on.

Finally, there’s Colin Kaepernick whose protest has inspired many and attempted to create a significant conversation around the way black lives are treated in America. Some have attempted to say that his arrogance is most clear on the football field and in press conferences. However, this seems to be the problem of inferring arrogance from confidence in oppressed people—something I alluded to at the end of section two.

While for symmetry’s sake it would be nice to show multiple examples of how these cases I began with are examples of beautiful arrogance, it appears that they are not. It may just be the case that beautiful arrogance is rare. Some readers may even find this to be refreshing, that few have this

45 Lowell Cohen finds Kaepernick’s attitude extremely arrogant, but the evidence he points to is how Kaepernick dresses after games and his inability to stand in one place during interviews—interpreting this as a demeaning game he is playing with reporters (see, “A Humble Suggestion for 49ers’ Colin Kaepernick”).
kind of arrogance that is an exception to the typical viciousness of the attitude. But, ultimately, this fact may just say more about the barriers and pressures of oppression that face many living in the world today.
WORKS CITED


Yao, Vida. "Loving the Bad and Not Giving a Damn: A Defense of Psychic Disharmony." The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ann Arbor, 2016, *Dissertations & Theses @ University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.*