

This paper addresses a tension in our thinking about the morality of snitching. I understand a snitch to be someone who provides “the authorities” with information that may be used against a community to which the snitch herself belongs. On one hand, many of us believe that snitching is wrong—that there are illegal and immoral activities that should not be reported to the authorities, and that those who do report them to the authorities are blameworthy for it. While some think that police informants are a “potent and sometimes necessary crime-fighting tool,” others believe that cooperating with law enforcement—especially in ways that will negatively affect minoritized people—is at least *prima facie* wrong.¹ More generally, many of us believe that we have reason to avoid seeking authority involvement when settling interpersonal conflicts (as, for instance, we might be rightfully annoyed with a sibling who “tattles” on us to a parent). On the other hand, we are sympathetic to the fact that victims of wrongdoing often lack the capacity to redress the wrongs done unto them. We recognize that seeking justice for victims may require calling the authorities for help. We lament the fact that sexual assault, domestic violence, and labor violations are underreported and know that anti-snitching norms contribute to their underreporting. Can we consistently condemn snitching and believe that some wrongdoers need to be turned into the authorities?

One reason to be skeptical of snitching is skepticism about law enforcement in general. At present, we have good reason to refrain as much as possible from calling upon law enforcement to respond to wrongdoing. Not only does policing disproportionately impact members of marginalized groups—including communities of color, people with disabilities and mental health disorders, undocumented persons, and homeless persons—but police are often ill-equipped to handle the problems they are called to address, which generally do not require forceful intervention from armed and uniformed government employees.² By settling conflicts on our own when possible and contacting community-based responders rather than the police when not, we can mitigate crises more effectively and without running the risks associated with police involvement.

¹ Alexandra Natapoff, *Snitching: Criminal Informants and the Erosion of American Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 2.

² For discussion of the importance and effectiveness of community-based (rather than police and other institutional) responses to violence, see, e.g., Mimi E. Kim, “Moving Beyond Critique: Creative Interventions and Reconstructions of Community Accountability,” *Social Justice* 37, no. 4 (2011): 14-35; Ching-In Chen, Jai Dulani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, eds., *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Partner Violence Within Activist Communities* (Chico: AK Press, 2016); Thomas S. Dee and Jaymes Pyne, “A Community Response Approach to Mental Health and Substance Abuse Crises Reduced Crime” *Science Advances* 8, no. 23 (2022): 1-9; and Sarah A. Seo, “Police Officers Shouldn’t Be the Ones to Enforce Traffic Laws,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/15/opinion/police-daunte-wright-traffic-stops.html>.

However, in this paper, I would like to consider what grounds we have for thinking that snitching is wrong apart from moral skepticism about the police. One motivation for this is practical: if there are reasons to think that snitching is wrong apart from police corruption, they are likely to be reasons that even police supporters should take into consideration, by their own lights. Another motivation is conceptual: I don't think that unjust policing alone explains everything that is wrong about snitching. For one, my intuitions about snitching's *prima facie* moral wrongness do not change when I imagine that the authorities to whom the snitch provides information are benevolent. Even if laws were enacted and enforced compassionately and without prejudice, I believe that we would *still* have moral reason not to snitch.³ Consider the negative attitudes many of us have toward "tattling" and similar forms of wrong-reporting. As a child, you might have resented your sibling for "telling on you" to a parent or resented a classmate for reporting your behavior to a teacher. As an adult, you might be annoyed with children who tattle on their peers to you. (A colleague once told me that when he was in elementary school, one teacher of his would pin a "tattletail" on tattletales: any student who reported another student's behavior to the teacher without first trying to resolve the problem interpersonally. This is obviously extreme and probably not a great pedagogical practice, but it captures our general disdain for unnecessarily involving authority figures to resolve interpersonal conflicts.) In these cases, we have no reason to doubt the moral standing of the relevant authorities (parents, teachers) and may even have good reason to believe that their intervention would be genuinely helpful. Yet, there is still an intuition that children should learn to resolve conflicts among themselves before asking an authority to intervene—and, in many circumstances, to refrain from asking an authority to intervene even if they *cannot* resolve the conflict among themselves. I suspect the reasons we have to condemn tattling are importantly similar to the ones we have for condemning snitching.

So, why is snitching morally wrong? One reason is that it evinces *disloyalty*. It is well known that loyalty and morality can come into conflict. When an association becomes part of a person's identity, we expect that she will be committed to preserving that association, even if doing so requires that she act wrongly; as the joke has it, a friend will help you move house, but a good friend will help you move a body.⁴ We often assume that when morality recommends one course of action and our personal commitments another, we ought to prioritize morality.⁵ This assumption isn't unfounded. The idea that you could have just as much or more reason to help your friend conceal a murder as to

³ Here, I am not imagining an ideal society where all institutions are perfectly just, but a society where law enforcement is benevolent. Later on, I discuss the non-ideal theoretical assumptions underlying my account of snitching's wrongfulness.

⁴ For discussion of conflicts of loyalty and the dilemmas they present, see, e.g., Troy Jollimore, *On Loyalty* (New York: Routledge, 2013), especially 31-51; and John Kleinig, *On Loyalty and Loyalties: The Contours of a Problematic Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵ Susan Wolf discusses this "metamoral" assumption in "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982): 438.

seek justice for the crime's victim may seem extreme. However, for many of us, betraying the people we love most is so unthinkable that we would be prepared to commit serious evils to avoid it. This is the sentiment that motivated journalist Anna Quindlen to say, "I would be fully prepared to lie under oath if I considered it to be the best thing for my kid. I would consider that a more moral position than telling the truth. And I am certain I am in the majority."⁶ By definition, a snitch provides the authorities with potentially damaging information about *her own community*. A gang member who cooperates with the police is a snitch, but a passerby who witnesses gang activity and reports it to the police is not; the passerby owed the gang no loyalty. The fact that snitching involves betraying one's own community—that snitching by definition involves acting disloyally—is a reason to think that snitching is wrongful.

Again, however, I don't think disloyalty explains everything that is wrong about snitching. For one, the view that snitching is wrongful because it evinces disloyalty does not provide us with a basis for condemning snitching but not other forms of wrong-reporting that also involve disloyalty. For instance, like snitches, whistleblowers have often pledged loyalty to the institutions whose wrongs they report.⁷ Yet, many of us *praise* whistleblowers for reporting wrongdoing, even as we condemn snitches. This suggests that disloyalty does not entirely explain our negative evaluation of snitching.

If we consider the differences between snitching and whistleblowing, we can gain insight into what might be uniquely wrong about snitching. Take Edward Snowden, who blew the whistle on the National Security Agency's warrantless surveillance program (among other things). Snowden provided damaging information about government institutions to journalists with the intention of having the information made public. While a snitch provides the authorities with information about a group under those authorities' jurisdiction, Snowden provided information *about* an authoritative body (the government) *to* a group under its jurisdiction (the American public).⁸ The relative positions of the agent providing the information and the agent receiving it are relevant to our moral judgments about wrong-reporting.

In what follows, I use this observation as a starting point for an account of the wrongfulness of snitching. I argue that snitching is wrongful because it involves providing the authorities with information that threatens minority groups we have reason to protect. I call the minority groups of interest to my argument *moral subcultures*. A moral subculture is a community where some prevailing, mainstream norms are suspended, creating a space where its members' interests can be voiced and supported. Moral subcultures are important; among other things, they are essential to moral progress and

⁶ Quoted in Jollimore, *On Loyalty*, 41.

⁷ For discussion of the relevance of "insiders" and "outsiders" to whistleblowing, see Candace Delmas, "The Ethics of Government Whistleblowing," *Social Theory and Practice*, 41, no. 1 (2015): 78.

⁸ In the opening sentences of his memoir, Snowden writes, "I used to work for the government, but now I work for the public." *Permanent Record* (New York: Picador, 2019), 1.

to the wellbeing of oppressed people. We have good reason to want many moral subcultures to thrive and to operate with a high degree of autonomy. And insofar as snitching *threatens* the autonomy of moral subcultures worth protecting, snitching is wrongful.

Consider the following case:

UNION: Uma, a member of the labor union at Daintree Inc., reveals the details of a union meeting to a Daintree executive. Her revelation may negatively impact the union's position in an upcoming contract negotiation, where it seeks to secure a living wage for Daintree workers.

Uma has acted wrongly, and the relative positions of the labor union and the company executive to whom Uma snitches are relevant to our moral evaluation of her actions. Daintree has authority over its workers: it controls its employees' sources of livelihood and issues commands its employees must obey at risk of retaliation.⁹ Labor unions exist to protect workers from employers who abuse their authority. A labor union is a moral subculture: within a union, the prevailing, mainstream norms of the "factory floor" preventing workers from voicing concerns about their superiors and their working conditions are suspended. By suspending these norms, workers can air their grievances freely and organize to address them in ways they otherwise couldn't. Labor unions serve important moral and political aims; among other things, they are crucial to workers' pursuit of fair pay and ultimately to reducing economic inequality. In the case above, the union is actively seeking remedies for Daintree's moral failure to pay its employees a living wage. When we judge that Uma has acted wrongly, it matters to us that the union exists to protect workers from their employer's wrongdoing and that Uma is undermining that aim. To function effectively, unions must have a high degree of autonomy. Any norms preventing workers from openly airing their grievances cannot be suspended if union proceedings are monitored by their employer.¹⁰ Therefore, when she shares details of the union meeting with a Daintree executive, Uma puts the union's autonomy at risk. Because Uma's snitching threatens the union's autonomy, her snitching is wrongful.

On my understanding, a moral subculture is any community where the broader norms governing society's behavior are suspended. Whether a community counts as a moral subculture is contextual. In UNION, the labor union to which Uma belongs is a moral

⁹ For extensive discussion of the authority employers exercise over their workers, see Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk About It)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 69-70.

subculture of the company that employs them. Within the union, the norms of the factory floor—including norms requiring certain dress, demeanor, and prohibiting certain speech—are suspended. But even within the union, certain norms may be considered mainstream (for instance, norms advocated by union leadership) and others not. For another example of a moral subculture, consider a society that endorses a racist morality. In this context, any community within that society that rejects racism is a moral subculture. This might be a single household in which children are taught to challenge racist norms, a school whose administration explicitly denounces racist norms, or an entire city that rejects racist norms endorsed by its neighbors.

James C. Scott's discussion of *infrapolitics*—the “veiled struggle” of subordinated groups—provides further insight into the threats snitching poses for moral subcultures.¹¹ According to Scott, acts of resistance are often invisible, and must *stay* invisible—or “off the public transcript”—to avoid being repressed. For example, when slaves engaged in “theft, pilfering, feigned ignorance, shirking or careless labor, footdragging, secret trade and production for sale, sabotage of crops, livestock, and machinery, arson, flight, and so on,” they were engaging in infrapolitics, resisting in ways that were invisible to their oppressors.¹² Another way a subordinated group might engage in infrapolitics is by meeting “offstage”, out of the dominant group's earshot, to discuss the circumstances of their oppression and to organize resistance. According to Scott, in order to sustain infrapolitical movements, members of subordinated groups must keep the hidden transcripts of their offstage meetings secret, and anti-snitching norms exist in part to safeguard those transcripts:

[T]he discursive practices offstage sustain resistance in the same way in which the informal peer pressure of factory workers discourages any individual worker from exceeding work norms and becoming a rate-buster. The subordinate moves back and forth, as it were, between two worlds: the world of the master and the offstage world of subordinates. Both of these worlds have sanctioning power. While subordinates normally can monitor the public transcript performance of other subordinates, the dominant can rarely monitor the fully hidden transcript. This means that any subordinate who seeks privilege by ingratiating himself to his superior [e.g., by snitching] will have to answer for that conduct once he returns to the world of his peers.¹³

This passage illuminates the function of anti-snitching norms. If snitching is wrongful because it threatens the autonomy of moral subcultures that are essential to moral

¹¹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 184.

¹² *Ibid.*, 188.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 191.

progress and to the wellbeing of oppressed people, anti-snitching norms that penalize or ostracize snitches—that force snitches to “answer for their conduct in the world of their peers”—exist to protect moral subcultures from authorities that would undermine their ability to pursue their aims effectively.

Some moral subcultures, like labor unions, are important because they are essential to moral and political progress: by providing spaces where prevailing norms governing speech and conduct can be suspended, moral subcultures make it possible to challenge those norms are harmful or oppressive. Without moral subcultures, mainstream morality would never be challenged. Moral progress could not have occurred without abolitionists, suffragists, civil rights activists, and others who created spaces where unjust norms could be called into question. However, some moral subcultures are important not only or even primarily because of the crucial role they play in resistance movements, but because they are vital for the wellbeing and flourishing of their members.¹⁴ Consider the following case:

STUDENT ORGANIZATION: Stefan is a member of the Black students’ organization at a predominantly White college. The organization has a tradition of occasionally breaking into college buildings after hours for meetings and parties. Uncomfortable with violating reasonable university policy, Stefan voices his concern to the organization’s president, who brushes it off. He then informs a college dean, putting the organization at risk of suspension.

On my view, the judgment that Stefan has acted wrongly is grounded in the value of the organization his snitching has threatened. Black students’ organizations at predominantly White institutions are important. Without a doubt, they are crucial sites of activism. But these spaces—where prevailing norms governing “acceptable” conduct and race talk at predominantly White institutions can be safely suspended—provide Black students not only with opportunities to organize resistance movements, but also to create spaces where they can feel at home.¹⁵ (The importance of making spaces available for members of oppressed social groups to congregate is captured in Zora Neale Hurston’s denouncement of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate schools, in which she writes, “How much satisfaction can I get from a court order for somebody to associate with me

¹⁴ For discussion of the importance of foregrounding joy and flourishing rather than resistance in our understanding of living meaningfully under conditions of oppression, see Lindsay Stewart, *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021).

¹⁵ See Antar A. Tichavakunda, “Studying Black Student Life on Campus: Toward a Theory of Black Placemaking in Higher Education,” *Urban Education* (2020): 1-28.

who does not wish me near them?"¹⁶ Even critics of Hurston's opinion of *Brown* can appreciate her main point: restricting spaces where members of the Black community can congregate and suspend the norms of a predominantly White society threatens their flourishing.) It may be the case that students at Stefan's university have a *pro tanto* duty to obey reasonable university rules prohibiting after-hours building access in the same way we have a *pro tanto* duty to obey the law in a reasonably just society, and that the Black students' association acts wrongfully when it breaks into university buildings after hours.¹⁷ However, this hardly seems like a grave enough wrong to warrant the suspension of a group that empowers and protects its members. Because Stefan's snitching threatens the autonomy of the Black students' organization, his snitching is wrongful.

If I am right that snitches threaten the autonomy of moral subcultures worth protecting, we can explain why someone who reports to a *peer*, but not an authority, is not a snitch. If Uma shared the proceedings of a union meeting with a fellow worker, she would not be threatening the autonomy of the union, and therefore would not be a snitch. Similarly, if Stefan shared his concerns about violating university policy with another college student rather than with a dean, he would not be a snitch. The judgment that snitching is wrong is not grounded in the fact that a group's secrets were divulged to an outsider, but that they were divulged to an outsider with *authority* over the group. The account of snitching I have offered explains why there are *distinctive* risks for moral subcultures when authorities become involved in their affairs.

In order to provide cases that clearly illustrate the wrongfulness of snitching, I have not yet discussed cases with the kind of moral complexity that real-life cases of snitching involve. In *UNION*, it is easy to judge that Uma acts wrongly when she snitches on the union to the Daintree executive. The union clearly serves a morally legitimate purpose (it wants to secure a living wage for its members) and the authorities to whom Uma reports union activity are clearly morally suspect (they are failing to pay their employees a living wage). Moreover, Uma is not reporting moral wrongdoing to the authorities. She informs the company executive of the proceedings of a union meeting and not of any wrongdoing done by union members that deserve moral sanctioning. *STUDENT ORGANIZATION* is more morally complex. Stefan reports what may be a genuine moral wrong (violating reasonable university policy) to a dean about whom we don't have immediate reason to be morally suspect. However, in my discussion of the case, I concluded that the Black students' organization's wrongdoing is too minor to warrant putting the group's autonomy at risk. But how should we assess the morality of snitching when it threatens

¹⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, "Court Order Can't Make Races Mix," in Zora Neale Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New York: Library of America, 1995), 956.

¹⁷ See, e.g., John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

the autonomy of a moral subculture that does not serve a legitimate purpose, such as a gang or a terrorist organization? How should we assess a snitch who informs the authorities not of a minor wrong, but a morally heinous act, such as murder or sexual assault? These are extremely difficult questions and I feel deeply ambivalent about my answers to them. In what follows, I work through these questions in a way that I hope highlights precisely how challenging addressing them is.

In general, I think that the extent to which a moral subculture has a *legitimate* claim to autonomy explains whether snitching on that group is wrong. Thus, in some cases, including the following, snitching is straightforwardly unproblematic:

HATE GROUP: Heidi, a member of a White nationalist organization, reports the group's plan to vandalize a sculpture of Martin Luther King, Jr. to the police, who may use the information to thwart the vandalism.¹⁸

Heidi is a snitch: in providing the authorities with information about the group she belongs to, she threatens the group's ability to operate autonomously. Yet, Heidi does not act wrongly. Indeed, there is a strong feeling that she is *praiseworthy* for reporting the hate group to the authorities. This is because White nationalist organizations and other hate groups should not have autonomy to begin with. These are not groups that are essential to moral progress or to the wellbeing and flourishing of oppressed people. Any limited social value these groups have for their members is outweighed by the moral illegitimacy of the group's aims.¹⁹ If snitching is wrong to the extent that it threatens moral subcultures with legitimate claims to autonomy, and Heidi's white nationalist organization has no such claims, Heidi does not act wrongly when she snitches on the group.

I have argued that, in general, any legitimate claim to autonomy a group has depends on the moral or political value the group realizes. However, some groups that do not serve moral or political aims may nevertheless have some claim to autonomy. Consider the following case:

FRATERNITY: Frank is a member of a college fraternity that has a tradition of sometimes breaking into university buildings after hours for meetings and parties. Uncomfortable with violating reasonable university policy,

¹⁸ Side note: I am not sure that one can consistently have anti-carceral beliefs and believe that some people (in this case, members of White nationalist organizations) ought to be penalized in the existing legal system. I'm working on another project about this question and would be happy to discuss it further ☺.

¹⁹ Side note: I want to remain sensitive to the fact that the circumstances that lead people to join hate groups may on some occasions be similar to the circumstances that lead youth to join gangs (which I discuss later on in the paper). That is, under non-ideal conditions where members of certain groups have limited options for social fulfillment, a person may join a hate group not primarily out of racial hatred but to find community. However, I would feel uncomfortable acknowledging this fact in a paper. Any advice on balancing these considerations would be deeply appreciated <3.

Frank voices his concern to fraternity leadership, who brushes it off. He then reports the assault to a dean, who has the right to suspend the fraternity pending investigation.

Although some Greek letter organizations explicitly serve minoritized cultural interests, most of them do not exist to protect the interests of members of oppressed groups. But at their best, fraternities and sororities are philanthropic organizations that provide their members with a valuable sense of community. In principle, there is nothing wrong with allowing fraternities and sororities to operate autonomously. One might reasonably think that the value realized by Frank's fraternity outweighs the wrongfulness of violating reasonable university policy and that Frank acts wrongfully when he puts the fraternity at risk of suspension. However, suppose that Frank informs the dean of a morally heinous act perpetrated by members of his fraternity, like in the following case:

FRATERNITY*: Frank learns that someone was sexually assaulted at a party in his college fraternity house. He reports the incident to fraternity leadership, who brushes it off. He then reports the assault to a dean, who has the right to suspend the fraternity pending investigation.

The moral gravity of sexual assault and the moral imperative to prevent future sexual assault outweighs any claim to autonomy Frank's fraternity can reasonably have. Therefore, Frank acts rightly when he informs the dean of sexual assault in FRATERNITY*, even if it is the case that he acts wrongly when he informs the dean of the tradition of breaking into university buildings after hours in FRATERNITY.

Although some moral subcultures, like White nationalist groups, clearly lack any legitimate claim to autonomy, when making moral judgments about snitching, I think it is important to keep an open mind about how a moral subculture might serve a valuable purpose. For instance, fraternities do not immediately come to mind when we think of moral subcultures worth protecting, but upon reflection, they may serve legitimate social interests that would be undermined by authority intervention.

One type of moral subculture it is important to keep an open mind about is gangs. Although gangs often engage in violent behaviors, they are often also groups that provide refuge under conditions of injustice. The primary risk factors associated with youth susceptibility to gang involvement are not interests in violent or risky gang behavior, but poor family relationships, economic disadvantage, and limited opportunity for other identity-based social bonding—this is why initiatives to address youth gang membership often involve providing alternative avenues for social identity formation, such as opportunities to join sports teams.²⁰ Gangs provide marginalized youth with otherwise

²⁰ See, e.g., Jerome L. Blakemore and Glenda M. Blakemore, "African American Street Gangs: A Quest for Identity," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 1, no. 2-3 (1998): 203-223; James C. Howell and

unavailable opportunities for social development and meaning-making. Moreover, gang membership consists disproportionately of Black and Latino men, who are more than any other population targeted by unjust policing.²¹ In this context, it isn't difficult to see that anti-snitching norms protect already vulnerable persons from the instability and anxiety caused by unjust policing.²²

To be clear, my intention is not to provide a moral justification of gang violence. Rather, my point is that some groups, like gangs, may serve some morally or politically legitimate aims but also some highly problematic (or even morally terrible) ones. When evaluating the legitimacy of a moral subculture's claim to autonomy, it is important to be open-minded about what interests a group may reasonably be understood as serving under conditions of injustice. As counterintuitive as it might seem, I think it is often wrongful for gang members to cooperate with the authorities when doing so threatens the autonomy of a group that provides oppressed people with a community they might not otherwise have. When wrongdoing within a group like a gang needs to be addressed, there is a moral imperative to address it interpersonally before (and perhaps even in lieu of) involving the authorities.

For me, the hardest cases to evaluate involve moral subcultures that obviously serve morally and politically legitimate interests but that are morally corrupt in another way. Here is an example. In 2022, Teamsters Local 455, a collective bargaining representative and labor organization in Colorado, was accused of fostering a hostile work environment and condoning pervasive sexual harassment.²³ I was not able to find enough information to get clear on the details of the case. For the sake of argument, let us say that Teamsters Local 455 was pursuing a morally or politically important aim (perhaps they were representing workers fighting for a fair wage) while this was happening. Without a doubt, sexual harassment within the organization must be addressed and victims of the harassment properly cared for. But suppose that the harassment could not be addressed within the organization—that addressing the harassment would require

Arlen Egley, Jr., "Moving Risk Factors into Developmental Theories of Gang Membership," *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 3, no. 4 (2005): 334-354; D. N. Kyriacou et al., "The Relationship Between Socioeconomic Factors and Gang Violence in the City of Los Angeles," *The Journal of Trauma* 46, no. 2 (1999): 334-339; and Paul B. Stretsky and Mark R. Pogrebin, "Gang-Related Gun Violence: Socialization, Identity, and Self," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36, no. 1 (2007): 85-114. For discussion of the effectiveness of these initiatives to address youth gang involvement, see, e.g., Matthew J. Taylor et al., "The Impact of Sports Participation on Female Gang Involvement and Delinquency," *Journal of Sports Behavior* 39, no. 3 (2016): 317-343.

²¹ National Gang Center, "National Youth Gang Survey Analysis," retrieved June 1, 2023, <https://nationalgangcenter.ojp.gov/survey-analysis>.

²² Alice Goffman, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), see especially 37-39.

²³ Isabel Blank, "Union Turns Blind Eye to 'Pervasive' Sexual Harassment," *Americans for Fair Treatment*, October 5, 2022, <https://americansforfairtreatment.org/2022/10/05/union-turns-blind-eye-to-pervasive-sexual-harassment/>.

getting the authorities involved. If bringing the sexual harassment to the authorities would threaten the organization's autonomy, what is the right thing to do? Should sexual harassment be reported to the authorities if it would jeopardize the autonomy of a group that serves extremely important moral and political aims?

I never imagined I would write a paper that suggested that in some cases there may be legitimate reasons not to report sexual harassment. I hope I have conveyed my deep ambivalence about this conclusion. I am not sure what the right thing to do in these cases is. But I strongly feel that "report sexual harassment to the authorities, labor unions and fair pay for workers be damned!" is too simplistic an answer. There is a genuine normative conflict to grapple with here.

I do not want to condone the practice of turning a blind eye to wrongdoing in order to preserve a group's image. In general, when an institution covers up a scandal, brushing it under the rug to prevent their reputation from being tarnished, they act wrongfully. But what if the institution in question serves genuine moral and political aims, and threats to the institution's reputation would harm the people the institution exists to protect? I think that, sometimes, the importance of a group's aims makes it impermissible to inform the authorities of the group's wrongdoing, even if informing the authorities is the best way of rectifying the wrongdoing. But I leave as an open question what is permissible or impermissible to report to the authorities given the nuances of any specific case.

In my discussion of the morality of snitching, I have taken into account the reality of structural oppression and of our nonideal social institutions.²⁴ I have argued that under these nonideal conditions, snitching is wrong. However, one might wonder whether snitching would be wrongful under conditions of perfect justice. If prevailing, mainstream norms were perfectly just—if moral subcultures were unnecessary because there was no more moral progress to make and no oppressed persons to protect—it would probably be morally permissible (or even morally required) for wrongdoing to be reported to the authorities. While there may still be reason in a perfectly just society to encourage people to try to resolve conflicts interpersonally before involving the authorities, it does not seem like snitching would be *prima facie* wrongful. However, my interest has been in how we should think about wrong-reporting under conditions of *injustice*. Given that many moral subcultures play a crucial role in the struggle against oppression, the norms governing wrong-reporting should take the importance of these groups into account.

This conclusion has broader moral significance. On the view I have presented, the wrongfulness of snitching is grounded in the value and importance of the groups

²⁴ For discussion of nonideal approaches to moral theorizing, see Charles W. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165-184.

snitching threatens, not in any properties of snitches themselves or of their relationships to the groups they betray. This implies that under conditions of injustice, *we all* have reason to protect groups that serve important moral and political aims, including groups we do not belong to, and perhaps even groups that espouse values we do not ourselves endorse. The conclusions I have reached in this paper therefore apply to all of us—not only those who belong to groups at society's margins.