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“Repairing Self-Respect”

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Dear Colleagues,

Many thanks for engaging with my work. I have shared a work-in-progress that was originally written as a chapter for a book project on victims' duties. While that book project cheerfully proceeds at a glacial pace, I am turning that chapter into an article. Below is a first attempt at that conversion. I would be especially grateful for your thoughts on the following (1) the substance of the argument, including the relative amounts of real estate devoted to different parts; and (2) the conversion from a chapter of a large book project to a standalone article. Some parts need to be better developed here (e.g. the distinction between repair and resistance; the discussion of accountability) and there is a range of examples that make sense in the book (because they are introduced more carefully in an earlier chapter) but might seem haphazard here.

I look forward to our discussion.

Ashwini

Repairing Self-Respect: victims of oppression and duties of self-respect

1. Introduction

Audre Lorde recalls early childhood encounters with white hatred and contempt. On the AA subway to Harlem, a woman in a fur coat looks on in horror as Lorde sits down beside her, plucking her coat closer so as to avoid any contact. Getting her eyes tested at the age of three, the male doctors laughingly speculate that Lorde probably is simple; when one of them tells her she can leave, 'enunciating slowly and carefully,' patting her on the cheek, Lorde is grateful for the 'absence of harshness.' The first Black student in her new high school, other students laugh at Lorde's hair, and she is sent home with a note to her mother urging that Lorde style her hair appropriately. Lorde remembers, "Children only know themselves as reasons for the happenings in their lives. So of course as a child I decided there must be something terribly wrong with me that inspired such contempt."¹

Children grow up and, we hope, come to see that there are other reasons for the happenings in their lives. Under conditions of oppression, however, these happenings persist: strangers still recoil or avoid making eye contact; speculation about one's competence continues in hushed tones and polite insinuation; hard work and perseverance never quite seem to pay off; violence thrums in the background. These happenings are justified, expressly and otherwise, as resulting from characteristics of the victims themselves, and can have insidious effect: even when victims know better, they often are left with the nagging doubt that there

1. A. Lorde, 'Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger,' *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (Silver Press 2017):134-137.

is, after all, ‘something terribly wrong’ with them. Such doubt is not incidental to oppression but integral to it: oppression operates more efficiently when victims are servile rather than self-respecting.²

How should victims respond to the ways that their self-respect is damaged by the conditions of oppression under which they live? What does their self-respect demand? A prominent view is that victims, *qua* moral agents, have duties of self-respect, and that their duties of self-respect call on them to resist their oppression: duties of self-respect require, at a minimum, being prepared to protect one’s self-respect; insofar as oppression damages victims’ self-respect, then victims have a duty to dismantle their oppression. Victims’ duties of self-respect become duties to resist their oppression.³ I agree that victims are subject to duties of self-respect, but I argue that this duty calls on victims to *repair* their self-respect. Repairing self-respect aims to provide victims of oppression with some of the benefits of self-respect—of ‘self-realization, self-fulfilment, and happiness’⁴—in spite of their oppression and while the conditions of oppression persist. Dismantling oppression will be a lengthy process that is unlikely to be completed in any given victim’s lifetime, and a more localised response enables victims to navigate, flourish even, in the midst of their oppression. And in the context of oppression, which undermines victims’ self-respect, victims may first have to repair their self-respect before they can engage in resistance, properly understood. By exploring repair as a distinct response to oppression, I aim to illuminate the everyday ethics of living under oppression, and to draw attention to the multiple moral reasons and moral responses that animate victims of oppression.

The article proceeds as follows. In Part 2, I provide an account of self-respect. Part 3 identifies three types of damage to victims’ self-respect that result from oppression: faltering self-respect, incoherent self-respect, and compromised self-respect. In Part 4, I outline different mechanisms by which this damage can be repaired, focusing on collective practices of repair. Part 5 considers objections from demandingness and victim-blaming. Part 6 concludes.

2. Self-respect

I define self-respect as a *robust appreciation of one’s worth*, which encompasses two kinds of self-respect commonly identified in the literature: recognition self-respect and appraisal self-respect.⁵ Recognition self-respect focuses on whether an individual appreciates her moral status relative to others and the treatment to which she is therefore entitled; and appraisal self-respect turns on whether an individual meets standards of conduct and character, going beyond her moral

2. T.E. Hill, ‘Servility and Self-Respect’ *The Monist*, 57, 87-104 (1973).

³ C. Hay, [*].

⁴ [*]

⁵ These are two distinct kinds rather than competing conceptions of self-respect. See Stephen Darwall, ‘Two Kinds of Respect,’ *Ethics* 88(1) (1977): 36-49.

duties, that she has come to endorse. Recognition self-respect means that an individual appreciates her intrinsic worth; appraisal self-respect means that she appreciates that she is the ‘kind of person’ she would like to be.⁶ For the most part, I focus on recognition self-respect in this article.

An individual’s appreciation of her self-worth must be *robust* in that it can endure some adversity. An individual whose sense of self-worth collapses at the first failure or insult is not someone with self-respect.⁷ Indeed, we might think that such fragility is an indicator of someone whose apparent self-confidence is not undergirded by self-respect. Robustness does not mean that a self-respecting individual is impervious to others, but only that it does not falter at the first sign of adversity or insult. Equanimity, rather than protest, might seem to be the indicator of a properly self-respecting person.

One’s worthiness is an objective matter: an appreciation of one’s *worth* constitutes self-respect only when that appreciation is not based on mistaken beliefs. When an individual’s appreciation of her worth is based on morally irrelevant or morally objectionable factors, her appreciation is based on mistaken moral beliefs. Or these mistaken beliefs may arise from distorted judgment, for example, through self-deception or arrogance. Self-respect requires a clear-eyed view of oneself and one’s place in the world, including one’s flaws and failings.⁸ The dutiful wife who diligently self-abnegates her preferences and interests for the sake of her husband and child,⁹ the smug philosopher who over-estimates his talents, the treacherous friend who does not confront the depth of her betrayal—such individuals may have a number of positive self-regarding attitudes, and exercise both moral agency and autonomy, but they will lack self-respect.¹⁰

Finally, *appreciating* one’s worth requires more than holding a secure conviction that one has worth; it is to feel one’s worth: to experience one’s worth and “feel[] the truth of what is experienced.”¹¹ Self-respect often is treated as cognitive, with emotions acting merely as indicators of self-respect. For example, properly self-respecting individuals feel indignant when they are slighted, and shame when they fail to meet the standards they set themselves, but these emotions only provide

⁶ I retain these two types of self-respect but for the most part in this article I will discuss recognition self-respect.
⁷ See, e.g., C. Schemmel, ‘Real self-respect and its social bases,’ *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49(5) (2019): 628-651.

⁸ J. Didion, ‘On self-respect’, *Vogue* (1961). This means that those who benefit from oppression may also face challenges in fostering self-respect, even though they may have robust self-esteem and self-confidence.

⁹ I borrow this example from Hill.

¹⁰ I therefore reject a purely subjective account of self-respect. See Stephen J. Massey, “Is Self-respect a Moral or a Psychological Concept?” *Ethics* 93 (2) (1983): 246-261. Among other things, an objective approach to self-respect helps to clarify the distinction between self-respect and related attitudes, such as self-esteem and self-confidence. Self-respect, by contrast, does not admit of excess or unfoundedness.

¹¹ R.S. Dillon, “Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political,” *Ethics* 107(2) (January 1997): 226-249, 239.

evidence that they appropriately recognise their worth. Emotions, however, are also constitutive of self-respect. Robin Dillon argues against conceiving of self-respect as purely cognitive. She argues that undergirding recognition and appraisal self-respect is *basal self-respect*, a primordial form of self-respect that colours the interpretive lens through which individuals assess their own worth. Although Dillon labels this as a third type of self-respect, because it is essential to both recognition and appraisal self-respect as I understand it, I incorporate it into my general definition of self-respect. This experiential, rather than simply cognitive, understanding is essential for an *appreciation* of one's worth. When I appreciate some fact, I do not merely believe that it is true; I am also able to see some of its implications, adopt appropriate affective attitudes, and orient myself accordingly.¹²

These primordial underpinnings are shaped by experiences and interactions that range from the intimate to the social, from early childhood experiences in the home to experiences into adulthood. They are not subject to rational revision in the way that cognitive beliefs are, but neither are they set in stone: a child's secure sense of self established in childhood might come under threat once she goes to school, and the lack of self-worth inculcated through a neglectful family might be corrected through the kindness of a teacher or the loyalty of a group of friends. These encounters aid in fostering self-esteem and self-confidence, which in turn can aid in fostering self-respect. Self-respect is not only a propositional belief *that* one holds about one's worth; it is an orientation, a way of being in the world. If self-respect is necessary to leading an autonomous and flourishing life, then only believing that one is worthy is not enough; one also must believe *in* one's worth.

3. Self-Respect under Oppression

I understand oppression as the subordination of particular social groups and the privileging of others in ways that are routine rather than episodic or exceptional. In addition to the material conditions of inequality and insecurity, oppression is sustained through epistemic practices, which both obscure and legitimate the subordination of certain social groups, and through the deformed moral relations that obtain amongst and between victims and non-victims.

One of the pernicious harms of oppression is to diminish and deform victims' self-respect, and through this diminished self-respect, to enlist victims in their own oppression. I focus on three types of damaged self-respect that oppression produces: *faltering self-respect*, when victims do not have the epistemic resources to appreciate their worth; *incoherent self-respect*, when victims lack the experiential resources to appreciate their worth, and so experience a disconnect between what they believe and how they feel and act; and *compromised self-respect*, when victims must deliberately sacrifice one type of self-respect for the other, and therefore be complicit in their diminished self-respect.

12. A. Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger" *Journal of Political Philosophy* (2018) 26 (2) at 132.

Faltering self-respect arises when the epistemic resources required for self-respect are unavailable. Faltering self-respect can arise when public policy, law, and official discourse deny that victims are worthy of equal respect and correspondingly denies them the opportunities and resources with which to form and pursue worthwhile life-plans with any success. Under colonialism, apartheid, and slavery, for example, victims' unequal standing is enacted through their lack of political and civil rights, in the physical spaces into which they are corralled, in the violence to which they are arbitrarily subjected, to the policing of whom they may love, and to the theatrics of deference and self-abasement they are expected to perform.

Oppression also results in *incoherent self-respect*, which arises out of the contradiction between the epistemic and experiential resources with which victims can develop and maintain self-respect. Incoherent self-respect paradigmatically arises in contexts of structural injustice. On the surface, and even earnestly, the equality of victims is affirmed. Dissenting views notwithstanding, the epistemic resources are readily available for victims to form and hold beliefs about their equal moral worth. Implicitly, however, the opposite is communicated. Virtually everyone agrees that women are of equal moral worth and should be given the same opportunities as men, but shared cultural life is saturated with tropes that confirm the opposite. This results in a discrepancy between what victims believe, how they are treated, and how they therefore feel: victims of structural oppression may well believe that they are worthy of respect, but they are hindered in believing in their worth.¹³

Consider the following example from Dillon:¹⁴ a dedicated feminist who has worked hard to reject patriarchal norms relating to the female body and has come to adopt feminist standards and principles is nevertheless overcome with disgust and shame about her body, and second-order shame about this disgust and shame. As Dillon notes, her first-order emotions of shame and disgust are inappropriate given her beliefs. Might this mean only that she does not truly believe these feminist standards, that is, that she only suffers from faltering self-respect? Dillon argues not: her second-order shame and disappointment about these first-order emotions suggests that her avowed beliefs about the female body are genuinely held for she too recognises her first-order emotional response as inappropriate.

13. Incoherent self-respect, as I understand it here, is similar to Lindemann Nelson's *infiltrated consciousness*. In both cases, the individual loses trust in herself as an agent in response to external forces. With *infiltrated consciousness*, however, the loss of trust is cognitive and conscious: due to misinformation, the individual comes to believe that she is not a rational agent and behaves accordingly. With incoherent self-respect, the individual continues to believe *that* she is a rational agent; in response to external forces, namely, her experiences of the world, she does not behave in accordance with her conscious beliefs, and the discrepancy between her beliefs and her conduct is what prompts her loss of trust in herself as a rational agent. Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged*, at 21.

14. Dillon, "Self-Respect," at 232-234.

And yet, these emotional responses remain. They are “impervious to rational criticism, argument, and reconceptualization,”¹⁵ in large part because they do not arise from rational proposition and argument. They arise, instead, from the cumulation of experiences and interactions: the casual joking about women who do not conform to patriarchal beauty standards; the absence of such women in film and television, at least other than as the humorous friend; a ubiquitous dieting industry masquerading as wellness and self-care; the assumption that large people are lazy and lack self-control; the association of all things desirable with thinness.¹⁶ Rational beliefs about the female form will struggle to prevail over these experiences. Incoherent self-respect points to the gap between what one believes and how one feels.

Finally, oppression introduces conflicts between victims’ recognition and appraisal self-respect that result in *compromised self-respect*. In order to satisfy the standards they endorse, and to be the kind of person they value being, victims will sometimes have to compromise their recognition self-respect. For example, Serene Khader introduces Chloe, a woman who repeatedly acquiesces to unwanted sex with her partner to avoid arguments or insult, and Shreya, a woman of colour who works as a corporate lawyer may take on the ‘housekeeping tasks’ at work without complaint.¹⁷ As Khader notes, that these women comply without complaint *may* reveal a lack of recognition self-respect; however, they may feel but not express indignation because they wish to advance other interests: Chloe is keen to maintain accord and perhaps provide for a degree of stability, and Shreya is focused on building the sort of legal practice and reputation she has long valued. What looks like a lack of self-respect is instead a deliberate decision to foster appraisal self-respect—to be the kind of person one values being—even at the expense of recognition self-respect.

These compromises can arise from ‘double binds’¹⁸ in that a compromise is unavoidable but decisions about when and how to compromise nevertheless remain expressions of victims’ agency. As such, compromised self-respect is an instantiation of what LaGuardia-LoBianca calls ‘complicit suffering’: “an individual’s suffering is proximately caused by their behaviors and ultimately caused by forces that shape these behaviours.”¹⁹ Indeterminacy about the

15. Dillon, “Self-respect” at 234. *See, also* A. Baderin (2023). ‘The Talk’: Risk, Racism and Family Relationships. *Political Studies*, 71(4), 1347-1364.

16 *See, e.g.*, A. Gordon, *You Need to Lose Weight” and 19 Other Myths about Fat People* (Penguin 2023); R. Gay, *Hunger* (Harper Collins, 2017); K. Manne, *Unshrinking: how to face fatphobia* (Penguin Random House, 2024).

17. S. Khader, ‘Self-Respect under conditions of Oppression,’ *Respect: Philosophical Essays* (eds. R. Dean and O. Sensen) (OUP 2021).

18. Khader at 233. *See also* S. Hirji, ‘Oppressive Double Binds,’ *Ethics* (2021) 131: 643-669.

¹⁹ A. W. LaGuardia-LoBianca, ‘Complicit Suffering and the Duty to Self-Care,’ *Philosophy* Vol 93 (2018) at 254.

relationship between these two causal factors can result in victims misdiagnosing the causes for their suffering. In particular, it can result in two extremes: victims either take all responsibility for their suffering and see it as evidence of their failures, or they deny any agency whatsoever and blame only external factors. If self-respect relies on a clear-eyed view of oneself, then being compelled to compromise one's self-respect can trigger a series of second-order attitudes and psychological responses that obscure the nature of one's predicament and the responsibility, however qualified, that one retains.

Faltering, incoherent, and compromised self-respect are mutually reinforcing forms of damage. Given that faltering, incoherent, and compromised self-respect often go together, many scholars refer generally to damaged or burdened self-respect.²⁰ More fine-grained distinctions may be useful in calling attention to the different ways that different forms of oppression can damage victims' self-respect, in helping to better diagnose *how* oppression undermines self-respect, and in helping to better identify the ways that self-respect can be repaired.

4. Repairing Self-Respect

To repair something is to render it capable of performing its intended function, even if it does so in an unintended manner. A repaired item may bear the scars of the damage it has sustained or may accommodate this damage through modifications. Repaired self-respect will therefore not be the same as self-respect *that never was damaged* and repairing self-respect does not consist in mimicking a properly self-respecting person. Rather, repairing self-respect aims at approximating the features and securing the functions of self-respect given the past and ongoing harms to victims' self-respect. In this sense, repairing self-respect is of a piece with moral repair more generally, including repairing moral relations between and amongst victims and non-victims: a response to wrongdoing that seeks to establish and re-affirm our collective morality but that necessarily will be imperfect and unfinished.²¹ This is not to say that the repaired is inferior to the pristine. In some cases, a repaired item will be stronger or more resilient,²² and even when it is not, there might be some aesthetic value to its imperfections that its pristine version would never achieve.²³

A duty to repair self-respect presupposes the capacity to repair. This means that the need for repair cannot be so great as to extinguish the capacity to do so.²⁴ I

²⁰ See, e.g., C. Hay [*]; LaGuardia-LoBianca.

²¹ Margaret Urban Walker, "Moral Repair and its Limits," *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* (eds T.F. Davis and K. Womack) (2001): 110-127.

²² I thank Grégoire Webber for this point.

²³ I thank Helga Varden for pointing out that imperfection can have aesthetic value, for example in the Japanese art form of *Kintsugi*.

²⁴ I examine the question of capacity in Section V, when I consider objections of over-demandingness.

address this in greater detail in a later section, but for now want to flag that some victims' self-respect will be so damaged that they cannot be subject to a duty of repair. And the duty to repair one's self-respect is a duty of attempt rather than achievement. The account of self-respect I have developed here has psychological dimensions that will not entirely be within an individual's control—someone may not be able to ensure that they will 'feel their worth.' This is especially so given the interpersonal and collective features of repairing self-respect that I will go on to elaborate. If, as I will argue, coming to appreciate your worth is a collaborative enterprise, then repairing self-respect involves no small measure of chance in terms of the individuals one encounters and the interactions one has. A duty to repair will be a duty to attempt to repair.

a. Mechanisms of Repair

I focus on three mechanisms of repair—rejection, assertion, and reconciliation—that correspond roughly to the three types of damage I have outlined.²⁵

Rejection involves a negative moral appraisal of one's treatment or circumstances and entails naming and disavowing one's oppression. Rejection forecloses failing to notice one's oppression or seeing one's mistreatment as natural or justified. In short, rejection entails recognising one's oppression as such and the various ways in which it manifests in one's life. Oppression militates against this recognition in several ways, notably by advancing ideologies—what can also be described as 'master narratives'²⁶ or 'public scripts'—that present oppression as natural and by denying victims the material resources and social relations with which to challenge these narratives.

One way to challenge these ideologies is through 'counter-stories': "purposive acts of moral definition developed on one's own behalf or on behalf of others."²⁷ When a counter-story is successful, "[oppressed] group members will stand revealed as respectable moral agents,"²⁸ changing how oppressors see victims and how victims see themselves. When counter-stories are used to alter perceptions of victims amongst *non-victims* they can be a tool of resistance, but when they are directed towards other victims, they are a tool of repair. It is therefore helpful to distinguish two variations of counter-stories: *derivative counter-stories*, which draw on elements of dominant narratives,²⁹ and *freestanding counter-stories*, which provide an entirely distinct narrative universe.

²⁵ As with the three types of damage, there will not be bright lines between these mechanisms and they will often appear together in the wild. I think it is helpful to appreciate them as distinct mechanisms, however, both to appraise how they might interact with one another and to be action-guiding.

²⁶ This the term used by

27. Lindemann Nelson at xiii.

28. Lindemann Nelson at 7.

29. Lindemann Nelson does not make this distinction and focuses exclusively on what I call derivative counter-stories. She argues that these counter-stories proceed in two steps: identifying elements of the master-narrative

Derivative counter-stories draw their materials from dominant ideologies and repurpose them, subverting and co-opting character types to change the plot. Working within existing master narratives may be more effective in persuading *non-victims* of victims' 'respect-worthiness' since they do not fully disrupt shared social understandings and retain much of what is familiar and even cherished. This means, however, that they may not always be available or effective as a tool of *repair*. And derivative counter-stories may be more susceptible to co-optation.³⁰ Freestanding counter-stories can avoid some of these pitfalls. Freestanding counter-stories may simply sit alongside the dominant narrative, providing a more fully worked out normative systems that draw on different religious traditions and cultural identities, with a different set of stock characters, tropes, and plots. In this respect, freestanding counter-stories are more ambitious in scope, but they may, as a result, pose a greater threat to the status quo and are therefore more vulnerable to being stamped out and treated as further evidence of victims' cultural or moral inferiority. Freestanding counter-stories often need to circulate 'off-stage' to avoid detection and retaliation.³¹

Assertion involves enacting one's self-respect, flexing, as it were, a muscle so as to both discover and expand its capacities. Through assertion, a victim acts upon her recognition and rejection of her oppression—including her recognition that her self-respect is damaged—and seeks to narrow the discrepancy between her belief that she is worthy and her belief in this worthiness. Recall that victims of oppression inhabit a world that, however implicitly, disavows their equal worth and conditions them to behave accordingly: to take up less space, to make fewer demands, to bite their tongues, to smile politely. Victims may do so in self-defence, taking into account the risk of retaliation if they behave otherwise. But victims sometimes acquiesce without realising that they are doing so, habituated to playing their part, laughing along at jokes made at their expense.

that help to normalise oppression, especially through the use of stereotypes, and then re-telling the master-narrative in ways that defy these stereotypes.

30. As Lindemann Nelson notes, dominant ideologies are enduring: they are sufficiently flexible to mutate in the face of significant social change, to provide a universal world-view that is compelling, and into which opposition can be assimilated or discredited. Given that derivative counter-stories retain key elements of a dominant ideologies, any reparative potential they have might too easily be subverted. Lindemann Nelson at 157-160. *See also* Hill Collins, who describes 'controlling images' of Black women. If controlling images of Black women present them as hypersexualized Jezebels or aggressive Sapphires, a counter-story might reframe Black women's strength and autonomy as the 'strong Black woman,' who prioritizes others and remains strong in the face of loss and suffering. The trope of the 'strong Black woman,' however, can backfire, providing another justification for placing burdens on Black women, minimizing their pain and suffering, and putting pressure on them to deny or minimize this pain and suffering. Hill Collins at 98-99.

31. J.C. Scott, *Domination*, at 14-15.

Assertion can take various forms. It can be non-compliance with social norms that is minimal and that amounts only to an omission. A woman does not smile politely at the sexist joke even when she does not protest it, and does not listen patiently while a man explains her work to her, choosing instead to make an excuse and leave the conversation. Non-compliance can be more overt. Lorene Carey describes ‘turning out’ in response to casual disrespect, which could involve standing still and staying silent in a way that commands attention.³² Assertion can also take the form of protest: a communicative act that lodges a complaint of mistreatment.³³ Protest calls attention to oppressive norms and expectations and is specific and reactive: a victim is confronted by mistreatment and protests, names her mistreatment as such and expresses refusal, indignation, or anger, rather than, say, resignation or polite acquiescence.

Reconciliation typically arises in the context of inter-group violence or injustice and often is thought of as a way of dealing with the legacy of these wrongs—as a way of ‘closing the book’ on the past.³⁴ In these contexts, reconciliation is distinct from justice, begins with the recognition of injustice, and can aid in building just relations in the future. Reconciliation therefore is associated with ideas of forgiveness³⁵ and non-alienation; it is an aspect of repairing relationships that turns on the affective orientations of parties rather than the allocation of resources between them. I think of intrapersonal reconciliation as those processes by which victims come to terms with their role in compromising their self-respect, which precludes magnifying or minimizing that role, but includes recognising the ways such compromises might be inevitable, critically reflecting on particular compromises, and dealing with any moral residue, for example, through self-forgiveness and self-care.³⁶

Rejection, assertion, and reconciliation are mutually reinforcing mechanisms. For example, rejection not only enables victims to recognise their oppression as such, but also to diagnose the discrepancy between their epistemic and experiential sense of worth as damage rather than irrationality, and to discern when they are

32. “Some white department-store manager would look at my mother and see no more than a modestly dressed young black woman making a tiresome complaint. He’d use that tone of voice they used when they had important work elsewhere. Uh-oh. Then he’d dismiss her with his eyes. I’d feel her body stiffen next to me, and I’d know that he’d set her off. And then it began in earnest, the turning out. She never moved back. It didn’t matter how many people were in line.Turning out, I learned, was not a matter of style; cold indignation worked as well as hot fury. Turning out had to do with will.” Cited in Hill Collins at 125.

33. Others have argued that self-respect requires protest because protest is constitutive of self-respect or because protest is evidence of self-respect. B. Boxill (2010). The responsibility of the oppressed to resist their own oppression. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 41, 1–12. and T. Shelby Reflections on Boxill's *Blacks and Social Justice*. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 41, 343–353.

³⁴ Catherine Lu, “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation: the politics of being at home in the world,” in *Reconciliation and Repair*, M. Schwartzberg and E. Beerbohm (eds), NOMOS LXV (NYU Press 2023).

³⁵ Strabbing, J. T. (2020). Forgiveness and Reconciliation. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 98(3), 531–545. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2019.1687532>

³⁶ LaGuardia-LaBianco at [*].

placed in a dilemma not of their making. The reflective practices reconciliation entails can prompt assertion: a victim may realise there are circumstances where she can assert herself in a way that dissolves the dilemma or at least minimises it. And when she fails to do so, or her attempt at assertion misfires, practices of reconciliation can help soften the blow and prepare her to try again. Although rejection is key both to assertion and reconciliation, it is not necessarily prior to these—appreciating one’s worth is not principally a cognitive exercise. Assertion and reconciliation can prompt rejection. A victim might unexpectedly express anger, surprising herself and her target with her outburst, but when the target of her anger is sheepish as opposed to indignant, the interaction reveals to her that she is being mistreated and that her mistreatment is recognised as such. Or, in the process of commiserating with a fellow victim, and urging her to appreciate the ‘double bind’ she is in, a victim might come to better appreciate the double binds that she herself is placed in regularly and to recognise these as a feature of her oppression rather than the result of a personal failing.

b. Repairing Self-Respect as Relational

Repairing self-respect is an interpersonal and collective enterprise.³⁷ This is true of self-respect in general. Fostering a robust appreciation of one’s worth must be done *by* oneself but can only be done *with others*. Those who deny that they are vulnerable to the mistreatment of others and insist that they can maintain their equanimity in the face of insult or the occasional setback may simply be the beneficiaries of a social order that re-affirms, in word and deed, their worth.³⁸ The relational nature of self-respect becomes evident when we turn instead to those who are not the beneficiaries of such social orders. Under oppression, mainstream social relations militate against victims’ self-respect. Instead, victims must turn to alternative communities to repair their self-respect. Marilyn Friedman distinguishes between found and chosen communities.³⁹ Found communities are those into which individuals are born and raised, such as families, religious groups, social groups, nations and neighbourhoods, and chosen communities are those that individuals seek out or create, such as political and civil society groups, friendship groups, trade unions and workplace associations, and families.

These alternative communities are vital to the three mechanisms of repair I have identified above. Counter-stories, for example, often emerge with others. Counter-stories may emerge spontaneously and unintentionally. Lindemann Nelson

37 I use collective here loosely to refer to multiple interacting agents and not to denote an entity capable of group agency and liability, although some of the collectives I go on to discuss will satisfy a more demanding definition of collective.

38. As I argue elsewhere, oppression undermines the self-respect of privileged members: they may have self-confidence and self-esteem, but they are denied the means to develop an appropriate sense of their self-worth. Vasanthakumar, ‘Self-respect and Privilege’ *working paper*. See, also R.S. Dillon, ‘Kant on Arrogance and Self-Respect,’ in *Setting the Moral Compass: Essays by Women Philosophers* (C. Calhoun ed) (Oxford 2003).

39. M. Friedman discussed in Lindemann Nelson at 9-11.

describes a group of nurses who come together to organise a work social event. Over the course of several meetings and discussions, counter-stories emerge that recast the nurses' experiences in the workplace and change their understanding of their interactions with others, notably with male doctors. These counter-stories do not necessarily yield feminist manifestos—although they may well do so eventually, at least for some of the nurses—but they suffice to help the nurses recognise that something is amiss.⁴⁰ Counter-stories may emerge with *some* design. The creation of the Combahee River Collective began from a sense that existing organisations and movements excluded the perspectives of Black women, and especially Black lesbians. Members met regularly in Boston through what was a part reading group, a consciousness-raising group, and through local organising around police misconduct; these coalesced, through retreats in the late 1970s, into a more institutionalised collective and statement of Black feminism.⁴¹ Alternative communities are also spaces in which victims can assert themselves, speaking and behaving in ways that are unconstrained by oppressive norms and expectations. Feminist consciousness-raising groups did not only offer women an alternative understanding of their experiences; it afforded them a space in which to be raucous, emotional, uncouth, and angry, and a way to explore and rehearse modes of interaction and behaviour that they could use more generally. Finally, sharing experiences and feelings of guilt and shame could have a cathartic effect, helping victims reconcile to the compromises they must make in their self-respect.⁴²

c. Repair and Resistance

The collective or interactional nature of repair may suggest that repair is a form of resistance: after all, feminist consciousness-raising groups were instrumental not only in repairing the self-respect of their members but also in advocating for broader social and political change. And indeed, insofar as undermining victims' self-respect is a key mechanism of oppression, then repairing victims' self-respect might seem necessarily to be an act of resistance. LaGuardia-LoBianca argues along these lines, arguing that repair should count as resistance on two counts: first, such repair is a necessary precursor for resistance efforts that target oppressive structures and norms, and second, repair improves the lives of victims, which counts as resistance as such. In a similar vein, others have argued that rejection counts as internal resistance and assertion, insofar as it involves non-compliance with oppressive norms, could also count as resistance.

I reject the conflation of repair and resistance for a few reasons. First, there will be cases of repair that are not going to have any impact on oppressive structures and norms. A self-imposed exile can allow a victim to repair their self-respect without having any discernible impact on the oppressive conditions they have

⁴⁰ Lindemann Nelson at 1-6.

⁴¹ K-Y. Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Haymarket Books, 2017). See, also V. Seddon, *The Cutting Edge: women and the pit strike* (Laurence & Wishart, 1986).

⁴² LaGuardia-Lobianca, "Better Together: Intersubjective Agency Expansion as Resistance," *Hypatia* (2025).

withdrawn from; while these may be relatively rare, it does suggest that repair does not entail resistance. More important, the conflation of repair and resistance reveals a tendency to treat resistance as the main or most important response to one's oppression and a designation that one should seek. It is useful, rather, to recognise the different duties that victims are subjected to and the repertoire of responses these duties ground—responses that go beyond resistance and that are morally significant irrespective of their relationship to resistance. As I have argued elsewhere,⁴³ victims are subject to several duties, each of which calls for distinct responses. Recognising this greater range of reasons and responses is important for a few reasons. It more accurately describes victims' responses—what moral reason motivates a response, what constraints this reason imposes, and what criteria are relevant for assessing this response. It also helps to correctly diagnose disagreements about *how to resist* as, at least some of the time, arising from conflicts *between* victims' different reasons. And in doing so, it clarifies victims' practical reasoning, illuminating the different reasons that may be at play in any given situation and the ways that these reasons may conflict or be compatible.

For example, recall Shreya, the woman of colour attorney who is routinely assigned 'housekeeping' tasks at work. I discussed Shreya to illustrate compromised self-respect and the ways that Shreya might be required to compromise her recognition self-respect in order to advance her appraisal self-respect (or to pursue some other self-regarding good, such as her well-being.) But Shreya is subject to further moral conflict. Suppose Shreya's compliance not only secures her career advancement, but also places her in a position to better assist junior women and racialised attorneys at the law firm, and to successfully advocate for broader changes within the legal profession and access to justice. Shreya's duty of self-respect is then potentially in tension with duties of assistance and justice. To be clear, there may well be ways these conflicts can be resolved or avoided; my point only is that asking how Shreya's conduct relates to resistance obscures the more complex web of reasons that animate her actions. And as much as acts of repair and resistance can overlap, they can also be in tension with one another. A free-standing counter-story may be especially helpful in repairing the faltering self-respect of a group of victims, but by presenting a fictional account of their collective history or by advancing an alternative, but also unjust, hierarchy.⁴⁴ Or, Shreya might repair her incoherent self-respect by asserting herself against the white male janitor at her office, even though doing so trades on and sustains other oppressive norms. While it might be tempting to say that these actions do not repair victims' self-respect, properly understood, limits on *how* victims can repair their self-respect may arise not from their duties of self-respect but from their other duties.

⁴³ Vasanthakumar, "Victims' Reasons and Responses," *Harvard Review of Philosophy* (2022)

⁴⁴ As I noted earlier, a derivative counter-story might be more effective in challenging dominant narratives—that is, in changing oppressive structures and norms—but not be as effective in repairing victims' self-respect.

Repairing self-respect certainly is compatible with resistance that targets oppressive practices and institutions, and may even be a prerequisite for such resistance, but repair and resistance as distinct. For one, not all acts of repair will be conducive for resistance and in fact may conflict. Grandstanding, speaking up, calling out, anger—these often are dismissed as counterproductive for the work of resistance. But resistance is not the only game in town. Some of these disagreements arise from different moral duties rather than differing judgments about resistance. An angry response might be required by victims' self-respect even if it is counter-productive to resistance.⁴⁵ And repairing their self-respect need not lead victims to engage in resistance efforts. Indeed, victims might repair their self-respect through refusal: segregating themselves from society or exiting. Recognising victims' multiple and sometimes conflicting duties not only illuminates both long-standing and local debates, but also helps to address them. When victims disagree about the correct course of action, this disagreement may not be the result of faulty judgment or unsavoury motives, but instead may only reveal that victims are acting on different moral reasons. Second, I understand duties of self-respect and assistance, which I address in the next chapter, as more localised responses to oppression that help victims navigate, perhaps even flourish, in the midst of their oppression.

5. Accountability and Victim-Blaming

I want to conclude by addressing some key objections to imputing duties of self-respect to victims of oppression: that it is over-demanding and that it undergirds practices of victim-blaming. First, critics may worry that imputing duties to victims of oppression is inapt because they lack the capacity to discharge such duties. Indeed, if my account of the various ways that oppression damages victims' self-respect and agential capacities is true, then it might suggest that victims are not candidates for these types of duties. Certainly, there will be cases where oppression has so thoroughly degraded victims' moral personality and agency that they have no self-respect, or coherent sense of self, at all. A not-insignificant number of victims will simply not be subject to duties. But we should be cautious about drawing this conclusion too swiftly or extending it too widely. After all, denying that victims can be moral agents often is pressed by the privileged in service of justifying oppression (or taking on the mantle of saviour). And moral agency is not an all-or-nothing capacity—victims may have burdened or impaired agency, but remain agents.

Even when victims have the capacity *for* self-respect, however, acting on their self-respect may be too demanding. In some cases, acting on their self-respect might expose victims to significant harm, such as retaliatory violence. But the costs of

⁴⁵ Srinivasan has identified the tension between apt anger and concerns about counterproductivity as a source of affective injustice; where expression of this anger is a way of repairing one's damaged self-respect, it is also a source of another type of injustice, and one that enlists victims in the diminution of their self-respect.

acting on their self-respect can be more insidious. Given that oppression is so ubiquitous, and its predations on victims' self-respect so persistent and multifaceted, acting from self-respect might become all-consuming. Indeed, it can lead to a form of 'double order oppression' wherein victims' lives are not only shaped by their oppression but are further shaped by the demands on them to respond to their oppression.⁴⁶ Victims' duties, like all duties, are limited. First, where discharging duties of self-respect will expose victims to significant harm, they are excused from performance. Second, victims have considerable leeway in *how* to discharge duties of self-respect. The indeterminacy of oppression means that there will be uncertainty about which actions will best repair self-respect and what the attendant risks of these actions will be, leaving when and how to act up to individuals' considered judgment.⁴⁷ And indeed, self-respect might seem to introduce constraints on how it can be repaired, including by precluding the loss of self that constantly responding to oppression could prompt.⁴⁸ Duties to repair self-respect are demanding, but not excessively so.

Part of what makes victims' duties so demanding are the practices of accountability to which victims ostensibly now are subject. One set of concerns arises from victim-blaming: the widespread social practice of holding victims responsible for the wrongs they have suffered. In the first instance, victim-blaming wrongs victims. It minimises the harms they suffer, distracts from holding their perpetrators to account, and can instil self-blame and self-doubt. When victim-blaming targets victims of oppression, it also sustains oppressive norms and stereotypes, and because it distracts attention from the actual causes of victims' oppression, it gets in the way of addressing these causes. If poverty is taken to result from the poor's choices, then this calls for interventions that focus on the poor, rather than on the socio-economic relations that structure their life-chances and options. Victim-blaming does not merely reflect oppressive norms but serves in their perpetuation.⁴⁹

Serene Khader, for example, argues that accounts of victims' duties overstate the level of agency that victims' have under the constraints of oppression, which routinely place them in double-binds, and fail to recognise that victims might outwardly comply with oppressive norms without necessarily internalising those norms or otherwise damaging their rational capacities.⁵⁰ As a result, Khader

46. J. Harvey (2010) "Victims, Resistance, and Civilized Oppression," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41, 13-27.

47. Hay argues that duties of self-respect are imperfect duties: victims are duty-bound to the repair their self-respect, but how they do so is left to them. Hay (2011).

48. J. Hampton, 'Selflessness and the Loss of Self,' *Social Philosophy and Policy* 10(1) (1993): 135-165.

49. A. Vasanthakumar, "Beginning from Injustice," in *Law, Politics, and Responding to Injustice* (Routledge 2024).

50. S. Khader, 'Self-Respect under Conditions of Oppression,' in *Respect: Philosophical Essays* (eds. R. Dean and O. Sensen) (Oxford University Press, 2021): 232-251. Khader focuses on Carol Hay's account of victims' duties to resist their oppression. In brief, Hay argues that victim have a duty to respect their rational capacities, which entails a duty to protect these capacities when they are under threat. Oppression undermines victims'

argues, arguments about victims' duties support tendencies to blame victims and their defective moral and rational capacities for their oppression, rather than to focus on the structural obstacles they encounter. Furthermore, Khader argues, philosophers should be sensitive to the consequences of their arguments and not only these arguments' internal consistency: "If philosophical prescriptions about oppression are likely to get in the way of social change that would end oppression, we should take this as a strike against those prescriptions."⁵¹ As I take it, then, there are two ways that arguments about victims' duties can sustain practices of victim-blaming: these arguments simply are instances of victim-blaming, and even when they are not, they can open the door to and provide intellectual succour for practices of victim-blaming.

I have addressed Khader's concerns in greater detail elsewhere.⁵² For present purposes, I will highlight the following clarifications. The argument advanced here is not that victims' duties of self-respect require overt acts of resistance, which Khader worries can in fact set back victims' interests and projects. While repairing self-respect, especially through assertion, can involve overt non-compliance, I have focused on self-regarding responses, many of which will have no outward manifestation to non-victims. I do take it that victims of oppression *qua* victims of oppression face obstacles to fostering a robust appreciation of their self-worth, and that many victims will actually therefore have damaged self-respect, but this is in keeping with Khader's own recognition of the 'psychic domination' to which oppression subjects its victims. And while victim-blaming wrongly attributes victims' oppression to victims' themselves, arguments about victims' duties focus on how victims ought to respond to their oppression—these arguments treat victims as moral agents whose responses to their oppression remain subject to moral scrutiny. Khader might still worry about the negative consequences such arguments risk; however, it is unclear that ignoring or turning away from victims' moral agency does not carry risks of its own.⁵³

Even if concerns about victim-blaming are set aside, arguing that victims have duties seems to entail accountability; even if accountability does not degenerate into victim-blaming, it will still be demanding, returning us to objections from over-demandingness. Limiting accountability might seem especially urgent first, for self-regarding duties and second, for victims of oppression. As Linda Radzik has argued, the value of privacy calls for "shielding certain decisions or certain relationships" from outside meddling.⁵⁴ For a host of reasons, we might want to

rational capacities in myriad ways, so victims have a duty to resist their oppression. C. Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, and Feminism: Resisting Oppression* (Springer 2013).

51 Khader at 241.

52 A. Vasanthakumar, "Beginning from Injustice."

53 A. Vasanthakumar, "On why the poor have duties too," *Ethics & Global Politics*, 16(2): 8-16 (online July 21, 2023) (discussing the political dangers of philosophical arguments about the duty to assist the global poor which treat the global poor as moral patients rather than moral agents.)

54 L. Radzik, "Privacy and the Standing to Hold Responsible," *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, (2023): 1-22, 3. See, also, M. Bell, "The Standing to Blame," in *Blame: its nature and norms* (Oxford UP 2013).

limit to whom individuals must explain their decisions about how to discharge duties of self-respect. This is especially the case in the context of victims' duties of self-respect. Accountability can instantiate features of oppression. When a relatively privileged person holds a victim to account, it risks replicating the presumptuousness and entitlement that can characterise relations between privileged and oppressed groups more generally. And insofar as these attempts, however sincere, function to educate the relatively privileged, holding to account may amount to epistemic exploitation.⁵⁵

Some philosophers have sought to limit accountability through the notion of *standing*: only some agents have the privilege or eligibility to hold an individual to account, such that standingless accountability is a *pro tanto* wrong to which an individual owes no response.⁵⁶ Drawing on our everyday moral practices, they suggest that what grounds standing can include having a stake in the duty-bearers' performance or being an intimate of either the duty-bearer or the agent to whom the duty was owed.⁵⁷ And they tend to agree that two factors—complicity in the agent's failure to perform a duty and hypocrisy—will disqualify someone from having the standing to hold the agent to account. In the context of oppression, these arguments appear compelling. First, they restrict victims' overall liability to accountability, thereby reducing the demandingness of being subject to duties. And arguably, they disqualify privileged members, who perpetrate or otherwise benefit from oppression, from holding victims to account. To return to Shreya, the male superior who routinely assigns her housekeeping tasks is, by this account, precluded from chastising her for undertaking these responsibilities. And this might, more generally, avoid some of the more pernicious instances of victim-blaming whereby the powerful blame the vulnerable for their vulnerability. I reject these arguments for reasons I elaborate elsewhere.⁵⁸ In brief, standing arguments tend to treat accountability as a form of punishment, which individuals are rightly eager to avoid, and which agents must have some special status to inflict. These discussions tend to focus on blame and sanction, embracing a "juridical model" that treats duties as burdens that others enforce, and issuing a final judgment from a position of moral authority.⁵⁹ This type of accountability, however, is inapt for the context of structural oppression, which is characterised by epistemic and moral indeterminacy. In the context of oppression, it will rarely be the case that this type of blame or condemnation is ever fitting from *anyone*, irrespective of standing.

55. N. Berenstein, "Epistemic Exploitation," *Ergo* (2018).

56 Radzik (2011) (2023); J. Edwards, "Standing to Hold Responsible," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* (2019) 16: 437-462

57 G. Williams, "Sharing Responsibility and Holding Responsible," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2013) 30(4):351-364.

58 A. Vasanthakumar, "Victims' Duties and Victim-blaming: accountability as deliberation," (*draft paper*).

59 A. Hills, "Duties" at 138-139.

Rather, I want to draw attention to the ways that accountability practices are more wide-ranging than blame and sanction. Expressions of surprise, doubt, disappointment, and curiosity invite the duty-bearer into an exchange.⁶⁰ Rather than conceive of accountability as punishment, we might think of accountability as a mode of deliberation. Daniela Dover, for example, has outlined interactive criticism as a conversational mode of accountability. On her account, interactive criticism is open-ended, symmetrical, dialogical, dynamic, and egalitarian. The open-endedness of interactive criticism is both temporal and substantive. Rather than an episodic exchange, interactive criticism is a part of or sets off an ongoing process, and this process is substantively open-ended: unlike with juridical blame, interactive criticism does not set in motion a set of scripted responses that the initial critic directs. In large part, this is because the relevant norms are not assumed to be settled beforehand nor is there even an assumption that they will eventually be settled; interactive criticism “seek[s] to cultivate a mode of normative discourse that acknowledges the potentially fruitful character of moral conflict and uncertainty.”⁶¹ Without any clear moral high ground that one party occupies, an egalitarian, dialogical, and dynamic exchange can unfold and one with the potential to be ‘world-making.’

Much more needs to be said about these other forms of accountability and their felicity conditions. For now, I want to flag the ways that these exchanges are reminiscent of the ways that victims can, with others, repair their self-respect. Interpersonal and collective processes of story-telling, deliberation, and testimony generate counter-stories that repair victims’ faltering self-respect; in doing so, they help to reconcile victims to their compromised self-respect; and they afford spaces in which victims can assert themselves, bridging the gap between what they believe and how they feel. Typically, we conceive of accountability as distinct from performance; here, accountability and performance are an iterative process such that accountability *enables* performance.

6. Conclusion

For victims of oppression, self-respect is no mean achievement. I have argued here that insofar as victims remain moral agents, they are subject to duties of self-respect. Given the various ways that victims’ self-respect is damaged under conditions of oppression, I have argued that victims’ duties call on them, in the first instance, to repair their self-respect—or at least, to attempt to do so. I have outlined three responses to their oppression that repair different types of damage—responses that rely on interpersonal and collective relations, especially with other victims, and that in turn can lay the ground for collective resistance to oppression but that are distinct from resistance.

60 D. Dover, “The Walk and the Talk,” *Philosophical Review* (2019) 128 (4): 387–422.

61 Dover, “Criticism as Conversation,” at 44.

To speak of victims' duties will strike many as counterintuitive. Duty-speak inevitably seems to invite practices of blaming, punishment, condemnation and shame—practices that are all too common as a way to blame victims for their oppression. And surely, it is more important to dwell on the duties of non-victims, who have greater culpability and capacity. But this miscasts duties and miscalculates the costs of focusing on the duties of the privileged. Duties are also essential to leading a flourishing life. For those unburdened by oppression, duties might be an unwelcome interruption to their plans and projects. Standard discussions of duties envisage autonomous agents on their way to a job interview or to meet a friend when, out of nowhere, a duty strikes: suddenly, they find themselves 'in the wrong place at the wrong time with the right resources.'⁶² But for victims of oppression, many duties are a *precursor* to any such project. To be subject to duties is integral to being a moral agent; these duties, moreover, enable victims to exercise their moral agency, to foster bonds of solidarity and support with others, including with other victims, and to collectively resist and transform the institutions and practices that oppress them. Even amidst oppression, victims can take responsibility for who they are and for how they respond to their several predicaments; doing so is one way for them to retain their moral personhood and ethical personality in circumstances designed to destroy both.

62. D. Jamieson, *Rights, Justice, and duties to provide assistance: a critique of Regan's theory of rights* (Routledge 2017).