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OPPRESSION: ITS HARMS AND WRONGS

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1. In this paper, I will focus on Sally Haslanger's (2012) elucidation of oppression understood as a structural, relational and group-based phenomenon.¹ The intuitive underlying idea is that oppression involves some unjustly harmful and illegitimate misuse or misallocation of power. For Haslanger, Fs are oppressed as Fs (as a social kind) by an institution I in a context C if (by definition) there exists some relation R, where being an F non-accidentally correlates with being disadvantaged by standing in an unjust relation R to others, and I creates, perpetuates or reinforces that relation (325). With this definition of oppression in mind, I will raise two concerns: one exegetical, another about the normative underpinnings of Haslanger's account. This paper's main critical questions are: What makes the relation R unjust? What normatively grounds the unjustness of oppression? My view is that Haslanger does not sufficiently elucidate these issues, which she must do in order to make good her moralised conception of oppression.

The structure of the paper is as follows: I will first spell out Haslanger's account of oppression more carefully (Section 2). I will then outline my two concerns (Section 3). Finally, I will consider some ways in which Haslanger could reply to them (Section 4).

2. As already noted, Haslanger aims to explicate structural, relational and group-based oppression. What does she mean by these? First, there is a distinction between agent and structural oppression. The former focuses on individuals' or groups' actions and it is the job of our best moral theory to tell us when some action is wrongful. By contrast, the latter is about collective, institutional arrangements and a theory of justice should normatively evaluate its wrong (314). Specifically, when thinking about structural oppression the important question is: is some structure (policy, practice, institution, norm) unjust and does it create or perpetuate illegitimate power relations (317)? Second, the relevant relations that oppression is about pertain to the distribution of goods and power, and to relationships that define expectations, entitlements and obligations (327). Finally, determining whether a particular instance of structural oppression is group-based involves two moves. To begin with, we must determine whether there is oppression and misallocation of power that causes some wrongful harm. For this part, one must 'rely on a substantive theory of justice' (322). Just looking at the effects or motivations of agents cannot yet determine whether the wrong is linked to group membership. Rather, group-based harms typically involve Iris Marion Young's (1990) five 'faces' of oppression: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. Next we must determine whether one's social kind membership non-accidentally correlates with a disadvantage. That is, whether the group's being a group of Fs is causally relevant to a particular injustice.

Recall that I am interested in examining what makes some relation R unjust and what normatively grounds the unjustness of oppression. Haslanger does not spell out in much detail what the unjust harm of oppression amounts to (or why oppressive harm is unjust). She notes that oppressive harm is about constraints imposed on the oppressed (320) and

that it involves Young's five 'faces'. In fact, Haslanger explicitly refuses to spell out the normative underpinnings of these harms because doing so would allegedly require a theory of justice. In the course of her argument, Haslanger juxtaposes moral and political wrongs with individual and structural ones. Individual/agent oppression is about moral wrongs, whereas structural oppression is about political wrongs (although Haslanger admits that the distinction is not entirely clear). Now, one clearly cannot spell out a theory of justice in addition to a theory of oppression in just one article. Nevertheless, I have two concerns relative to Haslanger's refusal to explicate the wrong of oppression.

Exegetical concern: The noted juxtaposition is unclear to me; it is also not obvious why accounting for oppression's unjustness requires a full theory of justice.

Normativity concern: As I see it, we need to account for the wrong of injustice for emancipatory social-theoretic purposes. But this does not require a full theory of justice; I contend that it merely requires an interim theory of injustice. In the following section, I will elaborate these concerns.

3. To start with the exegetical concern; how are we to understand the moral and political wrongs, which seem to map onto individual and structural oppression? Here is what Haslanger says in particular: moral theory is 'a theory of human conduct, so concerned primarily with individuals'; political theory is about our collective arrangements. Both can be morally wrong though (cf. 314, n. 7). Haslanger further hints that structural oppression is wrong in a unique kind of way (318). This implies that the wrong of structural oppression does not simply supervene on individuals who inflict wrongful harm and that individual and structural oppressions are wrong in distinctive kinds of ways. In footnote 14, Haslanger explicates a background assumption that her elucidation of oppression trades on:

'injustice and so the wrong of structural oppression consist not simply in unjust distributions of goods, opportunities, and such, but in inegalitarian social relationships, that is, in relational obligations and expectations that distribute power hierarchically.' (321)

Finally, the moral/ political distinction seems to map onto the right-and-wrong/ good-and-bad distinctions (334). So, structural oppression involves political wrongs, which pertain to our collective arrangements; it does not supervene on individual moral wrongdoing; political wrongs are about goodness/ badness (as opposed to right and wrong); and oppression turns on inegalitarian social relationships and problematic distributions of social power. However, it is still unclear to me how such political wrong comes apart and differs from morally wrong structural arrangements, if at all. In short, why think that political wrongs are different in kind from moral wrongs? This is an issue that Haslanger does not sufficiently clarify.

Consider next the normativity concern. A certain background assumption guides my examination of Haslanger's position: that our theories of oppression must not only elucidate the harms of oppression, but also its wrongs. That is, our theory should explicate the wrongfulness-making feature of oppression as well as its harmfulness-making conditions for social-theoretic purposes. And it is precisely the former normative aspect that Haslanger's elucidation of oppression fails to provide. Why do I hold that both wrong and harm must be explicated? To answer this question, let me start by sketching the desiderata of emancipatory social theory. Ann Cudd (2006) has provided a helpful preliminary account of the adequacy conditions of such a theory. She holds that our analysis of oppression ought to provide 'a clear and coherent definition of oppression and conditions to pick out the right cases of oppression' (Cudd 2006: 20). A comprehensive theory of oppression must further answer and give guidance to the following more specific questions (Cudd 2006: 21): Who is oppressed, and who benefits from oppression? How does oppression originate? How do oppressive institutional structures form? How does oppression endure over time? Our theory of oppression should finally provide some way to conceptualise overcoming it (Cudd 2006: 21). Cudd's desiderata fit those articulated by Haslanger (2000) elsewhere: an emancipatory social theory should provide a good and systematic articulation of

(for instance) why women as a group are and continue to be oppressed. We must explain and identify women's oppression that is due to sexist social structures. So, according to Cudd, a theory of oppression is made good by empirical accuracy (descriptive component) and by providing us tools with which to overcome oppression (normative component). This also fits Iris Marion Young's view: for her, without a social theory 'normative reflection is abstract, empty, and unable to guide criticism with a practical interest in emancipation' (1990: 5). Now, I agree wholeheartedly with Young. But I think that the relation goes both ways: any attempt to formulate an adequate emancipatory social theory requires and cannot avoid a normative theory in order to articulate why some ways of treating others are wrongful and illegitimate. This is something that both Cudd's and Haslanger's theories lack. Let me clarify: these theories do not lack normative components altogether. After all, both aim to say how we should proceed in order to undercut gender injustice. But, my contention is, an adequate emancipatory social theory requires a different normative component. In my terms, such a theory is needed to elucidate different forms of injustice (oppression, domination, discrimination) in their various flavours (sexist, racist, homo- and trans*phobic, ableist, classist injustices). I am not able to provide an argument for my view here. Still, for me the desiderata of an emancipatory social theory are:

- It must provide clear and coherent definitions of different forms of injustice.
- The theory must explain injustices of various different flavours.
- It should provide some way to account for the conditions of social justice.
- Our theory should say why these forms of injustice are wrongful - we need an elucidation of what makes injustice unjust.

Why should we think that the final normative requirement is necessary? As I see it, it is needed in order to meet the first three adequacy conditions – that is, in order to make good the descriptive aspects. If we aim to delimit different forms of injustice (e.g. oppression), where these forms are understood in moralised senses, we need an account that explicates that moralised sense. This is how feminist philosophers like Haslanger understand 'oppression' and its cognates. They are not understood in non-

evaluative terms; still, the relevant evaluative component is not sufficiently elucidated and often left implicit. Explicating the wrong will enable us to clarify ascriptions of oppression and other forms of injustice: that is, seeing more clearly what makes injustice wrongful can help us overcome conceptual confusion about 'injustice' and its cognates – it will help us meet the first desideratum. After all, although historically terms like 'oppression' referred to political tyranny, contemporary usage is much less unequivocal. Putative forms of injustice involve (at least) deprivation of freedoms, rights or deserved privileges as well as differential treatment. In Cudd's words, the post-twentieth century usage of 'oppression' refers to 'unjust violence, and economic, social, political, and psychological injustices suffered by a wide variety of social groups. These cases include: colonial natives, racial and ethnic minorities, religious minorities, gays and lesbians, and the disabled' (2006: 20). It is important to clarify conceptual confusion and to elucidate what we mean by 'injustice' and 'oppression' in order to specify who really are oppressed and which resistance strategies can be effective. I take a normative analysis of injustice's wrongfulness to be an integral part of this conceptual task. Further, it is important to have a clear view about (say) what makes patriarchal treatment of women wrongful in order to ensure that calls for gender justice have the required force. I concur with John Stuart Mill (1974) that, in order to avoid our intellectual and political commitments stagnating and becoming 'mere dead dogma', we must interrogate those commitments and their rational foundations. In this way, the justifications for our commitments are kept alive. With the above in mind, my concern is that Haslanger largely presumes such normative justifications and she does not elucidate them in detail. And so, she does not articulate what normatively undergirds the unjustness of some relationship R and why some ways of treating others are wrongful. Even though I take Haslanger to provide a laudable elucidation of oppression and its harms, I also take her view to lack this crucial normative component. And in order to make good her moralised sense of oppression, Haslanger should provide such an elucidation.

4. Haslanger has a number of options subsequently available to her. Contra me, she could simply deny that an elucidation of the wrong of oppres-

sion is needed. But in this case we would need to have a thoroughgoing metaphilosophical discussion about what renders an emancipatory social theory adequate. Haslanger could alternatively provide the normative underpinnings of her theory of oppression simply by appealing to what makes oppression harmful. Doing so would not require a ‘full’ theory of justice and we would still have an idea about the wrongness-making features that render some social relations unjust. However, I contend, just appealing to the harms will not suffice. This is because harms and wrongs come apart: I may suffer severe harms due to some painful medical condition but this makes the condition neither morally wrongful nor unjust. Suffering harms can be indicative of some underlying wrong, but they do not elucidate the wrong. A further normative theory is needed for that.

Finally, perhaps Haslanger could appeal to Young’s five ‘faces’ of oppression to capture not merely the constraining harms of oppression, but also oppression’s wrongs. Maybe Haslanger intended Young’s five forms of oppression to provide the normative grounding I am seeking all along. After all, for Young the five forms capture both the harms and wrongs of oppression. However, I do not think that this would let Haslanger off the hook. This is because Young’s normativity does not go far enough either and Young too fails to provide a good elucidation of why her putative wrongs of oppression are actually wrongful. Consider just one example case: exploitation or ‘who works for whom’ (Young 1990: 58). Young describes such oppression in largely Marxist terms, where one group’s labour benefits another group. Still, she seems to want to extend the notion to non-labour relations as well. Hallmarks of such broader exploitative relations are asymmetry and dependence. For instance, under patriarchy women and men’s familial relations tend to be asymmetric (e.g. women’s double-shift vs. men’s single-shift) and characterised by dependence (e.g. the gender wage-gap tends to make women financially dependent on their male partners). However, I submit, these relations are not per se morally problematic. An obvious example of a morally innocuous asymmetric dependence-relation is that between children and parents. So, we need something further to render such relations morally problematic, which will make exploitation unjust. Feminists often argue that under patriarchy such relations are problematic due to the relative powerlessness of women (cf. Okin 1989). Intuitively I agree; but again, power differ-

entials alone do not render asymmetry and dependence oppressive. Parents undoubtedly have more power than their children, regardless of whether we mean ‘power over’ or power in some more diffuse sense. Nonetheless, this does not render the relationship oppressive. So, the relations that mark exploitation for Young do not explicate what makes exploitation wrongful. Young too needs a further normative theory in order to make good the idea that her forms of oppression are not just the harms, but also the wrongs of oppression. This being the case, it would not be a good idea for Haslanger to appeal to Young’s five ‘faces’.

The gist of my discussion is this: for Haslanger, oppression involves political wrong in the aforementioned sense. However, I am failing to see how this differs from moral wrong and what more would be needed in order to elucidate the wrongfulness of oppression. Further, I have suggested that Haslanger must provide an elucidation of oppression’s wrongfulness. This is needed for social-theoretic purposes and without such an elucidation Haslanger cannot make good her moralised sense of oppression. Although there is much to like about Haslanger’s notion of oppression, it needs more strengthening on the normative side. I would like to see Haslanger take up this challenge.

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¹ Where not otherwise indicated, all references in brackets are to Haslanger 2012.