Victim Agency and Resisting Oppression: Balancing Responsibility and Blame

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I, Erica Cathlyn Stanley confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis examines how best to articulate victim agency within the responsibility to resist oppression. Oppression transforms victim agency, imposing severe constraints on their resources and choices. This creates the risk that any account of victim responsibilities may end up 'Victim Blaming': victims, with little control over their situation, may inescapably fail their responsibilities of resistance and thus be judged blameworthy, this blame becoming yet another oppressive factor. However, victims are not completely powerless in the face of oppression either, and to treat them as incapable of meaningful agency may also wrong them. To overcome this challenge, theories must reconcile the claims of victims' generally functioning agency with oppression's transformative effect, doing so through various argumentative tools I dub 'frameworks'.

I examine two such frameworks, both re-conceptualising agency under oppression. First, the 'Excuses Framework' argues that some victims fail to resist due to moral ignorance or coercion and, in having their agency temporarily impaired, ought to be excused from blameworthiness. Second, the 'Structural Responsibility Framework' draws on Iris Marion Young's Social Connection Model to argue that we should conceptualise responsibilities to resist not in terms of individual agency and blameworthiness but rather, as collective and constructive, lessening charges of cruelty and over-blameworthiness. I argue neither succeeds in avoiding problematic victim blaming. By accommodating oppression's transformative effect by depicting victim agency in a weakened state, both frameworks undermine the value of imperfect agency. Rather than turning away from these frameworks, I suggest we take a pluralistic approach guided by an additional principle of affirming and encouraging imperfect agency wherever possible. This involves incorporating these frameworks (and others) where relevant as piecemeal improvements to a more accurate depiction of oppression, positing the responsibility to resist fundamentally as opening oneself up to moral criticism and collective discussion towards furthering the goals of resistance.

Impact Statement

The approach to victim agency defended in this thesis could provide various benefits if implemented. Key to these benefits is a shift in both academic and public discourse around responsibilities to resist oppression towards a more collaborative direction.

I offer two novel contributions internal to this academic discourse. First, I re-frame how we conceptualise responsibilities of resistance from a starting point of blame, to one of imperfect agency. Second, I suggest a change in how we utilise structural concepts and formative feedback, in particular moral criticism, to analyse and accommodate different cases of victim agency into our theories of resistance.

When applied outside of academia, this approach could diffuse some of the defensiveness that claims of responsibilities to resist are naturally met with. For non-victims, this could encourage commitment towards transforming oppressive society and improving the well-being of victims. For victims, this could reduce guilt and inadequacy felt by those who experience the psychological oppression of feeling unable to contribute further to their responsibilities of resistance given the burdens that oppression places on them. This represents not only the alleviation of one oppressive element within society but also the reduction of decision paralysis that often impedes victims' abilities to pursue their own goals and dedicate energy to resistance in earnest.

Longer-term, this impact could encourage contributions towards resisting oppression from a wider range of individuals and a shift in effort being directed towards structural change rather than targeting singular symptoms of oppression on a piecemeal basis. The emphasis this approach has on maintaining ongoing and open-ended discussion would be a particularly effective fit for the collective effort needed for structural change.

In addition to the benefits most easily identified on an individual or community level, the same principles can inform policy and legality as tools to reinforce just and transformative behaviour within society. Whilst not explicitly explored here, the act of identifying oppression and its solution as structural in nature places policy and legality at the forefront of examining how institutions uphold oppressive structures, as well as how they

can be used to implement large-scale changes. Where it is appropriate, institutional tools can encourage this structural approach, with intervention assisting where pre-existing conventions are harder to work against on an individual level. Crucially, however, the mechanisms of this intervention should be continuously re-evaluated given the ease by which institutions within social-structural processes slip back into the perpetuation of injustice.

The primary way to bring about these changes is through amending how we conceive of and verbalise our responsibilities to resist oppression both internally and in discussions with others. For example, (1) avoiding language that presents the responsibility as a pass/fail condition, (2) de-emphasising blameworthiness, and (3) encouraging an open-forum approach that frequently refers to the wider structural problem, its contributing factors, and the ultimate goal of structural transformation. With this shift in dialogue, we may be able to tackle oppression in a way that is more reflective and empathetic of victim experiences without sacrificing our ideals of justice.

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Chapter 1 – Victimhood and Responsibility

Some claim that agents have certain responsibilities to resist the injustices of oppressive societies – this claim, alongside the details of when this is the case and what it should entail, form what we could call theories concerning the responsibility of resistance. Within these theories, responsibility is conventionally related to the two concepts of agency and blameworthiness. They first ground ascriptions of responsibility before then assessing the fulfilment (or lack thereof) of the responsibility once ascribed. When applied to nonideal conditions of oppressive victimhood, however, the relationship between responsibility, agency and blameworthiness becomes complicated – agency is distorted and blameworthiness appears inescapable, thereby undermining the soundness of responsibilities that rely upon these two concepts. From this, the Victim Blaming Objection (VBO) emerges: ascribing responsibilities of resistance to victims of oppression involves counterintuitively and problematically blaming victims for inevitable failures beyond their control.

In this chapter, I outline how victim blaming poses an objection to theories positing responsibilities of resistance. To do this, I identify two conflicting intuitions at play within the domain of 'victim responsibility', arguing that both are supported by a conventional understanding of how agents ought to relate to their responsibilities. I consider and reject several objections, first to the two intuitions, and second to the salience of their conflict to theories positing responsibilities of resistance. With VBO articulated, I evaluate how theories might accommodate these intuitions and in turn resolve the objection.

1.1 Responsibilities of Resistance

To examine the aims and challenges of positing a theory to resist oppression, let us first outline what we understand oppression to be, before examining how this might ground responsibilities of resistance. Oppression refers to a "fundamental injustice of social institutions" (Cudd 2006, 20), with the 'fundamental' element pertaining to the injustice

being ingrained into the background structures of society (norms, laws, and wider institutions) to the extent of being systematically perpetuated by the ongoing existence of these structures. In this way, oppression is a 'structural injustice', contrasted with the more conventional 'interpersonal injustice'.

Whereas interpersonal injustice can be theoretically isolated to causally linked acts from individuals or groups of agents, the same is not the case for structural injustice. Rather, structural injustice is created through the interaction of various contributing factors into an interconnected and self-enforcing web of 'social-structural processes', a depiction attributed to Iris Marion Young (2011, 53). 'Social structures' are themselves a combination of socially caused factors ("social policies, norms, investment decisions, cultural preferences" (Ibid, 54) etc.) that create a space holding different social positions among which a population is distributed (Ibid, 56). Within this space, certain actions, positions and relationships are encouraged disproportionately, creating concentrated advantages and disadvantages within certain groups. These power dynamics are further reinforced as multiple social structures overlap, to the extent that, when we experience injustice as the result of a single action (i.e. a racial slur), we are simultaneously experiencing the material consequences of a multitude of factors and resulting structures likely formed decades ago (Ibid, 54).

To help elucidate the concept of oppression as a structural injustice, Young uses Marilyn Frye's analogy of a birdcage (1993 as cited in 2013, 55). No individual wire of the cage can prevent the bird's escape, rather it is the wires interconnected into the *structure* of a cage that traps the bird. Similarly, the set of individual actions and social factors must interact and combine to form unjust social-structural processes before they warrant the label of 'oppressive'. As such, we can only properly understand the significance of how individual factors presuppose and reproduce oppressive structures when viewing them within the context of the other factors they are interconnected with (Young 2011, 60; Gunnemyr 2020, 569).

Another upshot of this is that individual social structures can change all while maintaining the same processes that in turn uphold structural injustice. This dynamic nature is why

Young describes oppression as made of social-structural *processes*[1]. Even if one contributing factor or structure is removed (i.e. by re-distributing resources once or outlawing one type of harmful behaviour), the remaining factors will re-arrange and re-apply the injustice (Young 2011, 47). Similarly, when new seemingly morally/politically neutral factors are introduced, they can quickly slot into existing structures to become yet another contributing factor to injustice. Where our social structures naturally siphon resources away from certain groups, these groups will end up suffering the brunt of new crises and reaping the smallest benefits from new boons and technologies.

Thus, while we might be able to identify contributing factors to structural injustice, "it is in the nature of such structural processes that their potentially harmful effects cannot be traced directly to any particular contributors to the process" (Young 2011, 100). It is therefore not accurate to label one specific factor or structure, or indeed the existing set of structures as the definitive cause of oppression – *structural* injustice can only be attributed to the 'social-structural processes' in full.

This gap between contributing factors and resulting structural injustice changes the framing of these contributions from conventional malice and moral corruption, to being fairly benign phenomena. When an agent contributes to injustice, they do so "indirectly, collectively and cumulatively" (Young 2011, 96), typically pursuing their own law-abiding projects in line with socially accepted norms and with no intention to produce unjust outcomes (Ibid, 52, 62–63). Similarly, institutions that contribute to structural injustice are often furthered with the amicable aim of providing various benefits and infrastructural support for a community. The reality is that most oppressive societies can still work functionally to promote and protect various values, goods, and freedoms, at least for certain groups.

Nevertheless, these webs of uncoordinated social factors accumulate into a social structure that puts certain groups "under systematic threat of domination or deprivation" (Young 2011, 52) while benefitting and enabling other groups. Most obviously,

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[1] This being said, Young sometimes refers to 'structures' and 'processes' interchangeably to mean 'social-structural processes'. I will follow this for brevity.

oppression runs contrary to our general values of freedom, equality and rights. Certain groups are subjugated having their freedoms suppressed and their rights denied. Even beyond the unfairness of only certain groups being targeted by this subjugation, it is problematic itself both for individuals to experience this restriction of quality of life and agency, as well as for certain groups to specifically benefit from the harms of other groups, especially when they themselves contribute to this harm.

Of course, if one is determined to reject oppression's wrongness, one might do so on the grounds of holding values compatible with oppressive circumstances. Some agents may, for example, claim to prefer strict meritocratic or individualistic societies or may conceptualise freedoms and rights without including subjugated groups. Nevertheless, where these individuals seek the benefits of the aforementioned values, I believe it is still appropriate to consider these to be *their* values. For example, the racist who believes they should have certain freedoms (such as to hold and express racist views) is committed to the value of freedom, even if their application of this value has become distorted and exclusionary.

I acknowledge that this is only one way of conceptualising how bigoted groups justify their beliefs. However, I consider this to be a particularly charitable interpretation and will proceed on the assumption that a substantial amount of those who are both systematically advantaged and disadvantaged by oppressive society hold general values of freedom, equality, and rights understood here as the archetypal moral and political values of a liberal democracy.

Whether we conceive of our responsibilities to resist as moral or political and which values we choose to ground them are both unimportant to our particular enquiry. As such I will remain agnostic on these questions. Granted, it may at times be beneficial to identify a specific underpinning moral or political value. Political values like freedom may be better suited to justifying organised action, including civil or uncivil disobedience, and may better illustrate the social-structural elements of oppression that an individual-lens may miss. Meanwhile, moral values like compassion may better motivate and capture

certain interpersonal forms of resistance, for example, correcting your racist uncle at dinner.

Admittedly, this stance keeps what exactly makes oppression bad largely underdetermined (or perhaps overdetermined). Nevertheless, it is enough to assume that a vast amount of common moral and political values we take as a "valid source of obligations" (Delmas 2018, 5), are vulnerable to being undermined by oppression. Given that our agency is largely founded on these values, we hold some responsibility to further or protect them. The result is the base claim of theories concerning the responsibility of resistance[2]: that insofar as oppression suppresses these key values, this creates a responsibility of resistance towards this oppression (see Richards 1983; Silvermint 2013). Resistance is thus posited not as merely permissible or supererogatory but rather something we are obligated to do. To merely acquiesce in an oppressive society is, in this way, ethically problematic[3].

As my enquiry is focused on the specific application of responsibilities to resist oppression to those who are systematically disadvantaged by it, let us assume that where oppression exists, it gives rise to prima facie responsibilities of resistance. As understanding what acts do and do not fulfil responsibilities to resist depends on what counts as resistance, this will largely stay an open question. To start, however, I will consider as wide a spectrum of potential acts of resistance as possible, before focusing on more contentious smaller-scale or civil forms of everyday non-compliance.

1.2 The Problem of Victimhood

Within oppressive structures, we can identify two archetypal categories of how agents are treated in virtue of the social position they occupy. This position is typically derived from membership in a socio-economically relevant group (gender, class, sexuality and so

[2] 'Theories of resistance' for brevity

[3] I conceive of the responsibility of resistance as a responsibility to *try* and resist, rather than to successfully overthrow oppression. Muddling the two would severely misrepresent how individual acts of resistance relate to oppressive structures.

on). Roughly speaking, 'non-victims' are the main enactors of oppressive harms and benefit most from systematic injustices. This contrasts with 'victims' of oppression, understood as the primary targets of oppressive harms and systematic disadvantages in virtue of belonging to a subjugated group. While these labels can carry pejorative implications in common conversation, I will use them merely as a descriptive shorthand for these archetypal positions within oppression.

This distinction is helpful, both as a shorthand to describe archetypal experiences of oppression, and more practically, to narrow down the scope of our enquiry to those who are systematically disadvantaged from oppression. Of course, in reality, individuals do not fit neatly within these distinctions. This is for three main reasons.

First, under an intersectional understanding of oppression, an individual belongs to multiple groups (gender, race etc.) with each occupying a social position on one of many axes of societal power. An individual may therefore be a victim of oppression on one axis, and a non-victim on another.

Second, 'non-victim' and 'victim' do not correspond directly with harming and being harmed by oppression. Victims of oppression contribute to oppressive structures and harm, while those in oppressive groups can experience harm as a by-product of oppression. As a result, someone considered a 'victim' within this paper may nevertheless appear to be, on balance, ill-fitting of the label. In addition to this, some draw the additional distinction between non-victims as oppressors and non-victims who are merely privileged bystanders. If oppressors but not bystanders actively encourage oppressive harms, it is a misrepresentation to group both into one label of 'non-victim' given that their perpetuation of oppression substantially differs.

Third, because victims will experience oppression in a variety of ways, they are likely to conceive of this relationship in differing ways as well. Whereas some will self-identify as victims, others may genuinely feel that they do not experience harm or disadvantage from oppression. Although it is dangerous to outright deny victim testimony, it is vital to understand that structural injustice impacts individuals beyond their personal experience of whether they *feel* oppressed.

There are two things at play here. For one, even those who live comfortably within society will still be, in virtue of their position, treated unfavourably relative to if they were not part of the subjugated group. These privileges do not indicate a lack of victimhood entirely, but rather that they are non-victims on a different axis of societal power i.e. class or race. The second factor is that some agents will align with the allegedly oppressive values, take for example, a woman who enjoys traditionally feminine roles and does not consider patriarchal gender roles to be limiting. Here, however, we must take a wider perspective. Oppression is not about specific norms and individual experiences of them, but rather a systematic suppression of a group's ability for self-determination. Within a patriarchal society, even women who enjoy traditional values have little choice over this norm's continuation – if the values that patriarchy holds shifted, they would have no ability to choose to return to these. In this sense, there is something objective in the way that disadvantaged groups are made worse off even when they personally take to the particular ways this manifests.

These caveats reveal branching lines of enquiry on how best to define victimhood and indeed non-victimhood that are both interesting and important to wider discussions of oppression. These are, however, not the questions I am concerned with. Rather, my focus is on how those who *do* occupy positions with (any extent of) structural disadvantage relate to their responsibility to resist. As such, it is best to understand the labels of victim and non-victim as describing societal positions (that one can hold simultaneously) rather than people. In line with this, I will use 'victims of oppression' to refer to anyone who occupies a position of structural disadvantage on *any* axis of social power.

One of the ways that oppression impacts its victims is through the apparent distortion and limitation of agency – victims typically have fewer "psychological, social, epistemic and capital resources" (Vasanthakumar 2020, 5), are burdened with increased costs, have fewer options to pursue their aims, and suffer harms directed at their personhood.

Meanwhile, non-victims benefit greatly from systematic injustice through the concentration of power and resources built into society's very institutions. When oppression continues to cause oppressive harm, typically to victims and at the hands of

non-victims, it is tempting to suggest that the burdens of redress associated with oppression lie in-equally, weighted heavier on non-victims who appear able and appropriate to carry this out.

This dynamic renders victims more complicated as targets for various responsibilities of resistance, including redistributive or retributive responsibilities. The worry is that once we take into consideration the conditions of victims of oppression, it no longer appears appropriate to ascribe strong responsibilities of resistance to them. Arguing that an agent has a responsibility to resist implies that failing to fulfil this responsibility marks them as guilty of some kind of wrongdoing (Hay 2008, 209). Under the assumption that other things being equal, agents are considered blameworthy for their moral wrongdoing, the imposition of a responsibility to resist opens victims up to blameworthiness for failures to resist oppression. Blame in turn typically suggests the exercise of moral agency and an extent of freedom and control over an act (Tognazzini and Coates 2018). As Scanlon (1986, 170) and Michael Zimmerman (1988, 38) suggest, by employing concepts of blame, our discussion of an agent's behaviour shifts from a neutral description of how one has exercised their agency, to the suggestion that their moral self has been stained through their actions in some way.

However, "given the ubiquity of oppression and the resilience of the systems that produce it" (Hay 2011, 29), for victims to resist their own oppression in their disadvantaged position would be demanding, dangerous, and often counterproductive to the pursuit of their personal goals and well-being. Crucially, victims are likely to have little hope, if any, of successful resistance on a substantial scale. Ascribing the responsibility to resist oppression to its victims then, "unfairly places an additional burden" (Superson 1993, 43) of inescapable blame for failures to resist *in addition to* the oppressive burdens victims already face. This is unnecessarily cruel to victims and counterintuitive to many of the ways we would like to conceive of and utilise the responsibility to resist. This is the Victim Blaming Objection (VBO).

Note that while I will use blame and blameworthiness largely interchangeably, my primary concern is with victims being considered blame*worthy* rather than being blamed

in actuality. Where blame is a negative evaluative judgement that implies an agent is responsible for some objectionable behaviour, blameworthiness is concerned with whether the agent deserves this blame. Technically, blameworthiness is neither necessary nor sufficient for an agent to be blamed. For example, even if someone is genuinely blameworthy, it may not be appropriate for any individual person to blame them – they may lack the moral standing to do so (see Cohen 2006, 118). Notably, by drawing a divide between blameworthiness and blame in actuality, one could argue that concerns around over-blaming victims in practice should not impact how we conceptualise blameworthiness in theory, potentially dissolving the relevance of VBO to theories of resistance.

While I appreciate this distinction, for simplicity I will assume that marking individuals as blameworthy in theory meaningfully enables blame and over-blame itself. The largest marker of this is that judging agents as blameworthy suggests their liability to *justified* blame, thus acting as an indicator to encourage and legitimise blame in actuality. Insofar as we accept this connection, even if particular theories of resistance are concerned with either blame *or* blameworthiness (or their associated concepts), I believe VBO holds relevance.

VBO impacts theories of resistance in a few ways. Firstly, deeming victims of oppression blameworthy for failing to resist when they had little opportunity to act differently runs contrary to the conventional understanding of blameworthiness as dependent on an agent's ability to freely do otherwise. Take for example an agent who has shot someone – they would likely not be blameworthy for this if some elaborate contraption physically forced them to pull the trigger. Yet, victims of oppression appear to hold little control over their oppressive circumstances, rendering them unable to do anything other than fail in their responsibility to resist (Harvey 1999, 79–80).

The second impact of VBO is that if all or most victims of oppression are judged as blameworthy for failures to resist, then we are unable to delineate between the variety of victim agency that exists in reality. The same can be said for attempting to circumvent VBO by excluding victims from blameworthiness entirely. Using such coarse-grained

evaluation presents a substantial explanatory weakness or an inapplicability to a wide portion of society. Either one renders a theory of resistance relatively implausible.

Lastly, if we accept the inescapable blameworthiness of victims failing to resist, we are at risk of directing attention away from the wrongdoing of non-victims and institutions that are arguably more to blame for oppression, or at least, who cause more apparent oppressive harms. We see this in our existing treatment of victims – the effort spent interrogating a sexual assault victim on how *their* actions might have encouraged the assault defers our attention away from combatting the actual wrongdoing of the assailant. We ought to be careful that a theory of resistance does not overfocus on blaming victims when they are not the root cause of structural injustice.

It may be helpful to understand VBO as an apparent conflict between two valuable intuitions regarding victim agency. First, victims *as a whole* are functioning moral agents for which moral responsibilities including the responsibility to resist oppression are warranted. Second, in light of the surrounding structural influence and limitations, oppression has a transformative effect on an individual's agency such that victims should be accorded some kind of special consideration to be blamed less or differently than non-victims. We can call these the Functioning Agency intuition and the Transformative Oppression intuition respectively. Unless we are willing to outright deny either of these two sentiments, any theory proposing a responsibility of resistance must find a way to facilitate consistency between the two.

VBO is not merely a fringe issue - Ashwini Vasanthakumar's meta-analysis points to it as "the most powerful objection to arguments for victims' responsibilities [of resistance]" (2020, 5). If running into the "morally objectionable practices" (Hay 2008, 170) of cruelly over-blaming victims is a necessary consequence of positing the responsibility to resist one's oppression, then theories of resistance face a worrying limitation. If on the other hand, the responsibility to resist can be constructed without these objectionable implications, then blaming the victim is less of a worry than originally thought. Accordingly, I believe that VBO warrants further exploration.

1.3 Why Must We Resist?

Perhaps VBO can be dissolved by denying either one of the two intuitions. For starters, by showing the limited agency victims have over their oppressive circumstances and the myriad of difficulties they face, we may already be tempted to deny that victims have a responsibility to resist. Given our structural understanding of oppression – in what sense is it even fruitful to talk of individual agential responsibilities when effective resistance is dependent on factors completely out of an agent's hands?

This apparent rejection of the Functioning Agency intuition can be approached by presenting resistance in terms of permissible or supererogatory acts rather than as a responsibility. On this view, resisting injustice is achievable only by the most heroic of victims and while being morally good to do, is in no way required to be a morally good agent. This would allow the moral asymmetry of judging victims who resist as worthy of moral praise while avoiding labelling those who do not as blameworthy.

I do not, however, believe that conceiving of resistance as permissible or supererogatory reflects the genuinely oppressive harms that victims cause to themselves and others in choosing not to resist. The concepts of permissibility and supererogation best fit situations with neutral alternatives to the supererogatory action. As Ann Cudd (2006, 199) points out, however, in the case of oppression, the only alternative to resistance is participation which is itself an ongoing reinforcement of oppressive structures. A crucial element of oppression is its perpetuation not only by non-victims, but also by victims who frequently "participate in, passively allow, or benefit" (Silvermint 2018b, 37) from oppression.

Here, an objector could argue that the *kinds* of harm that arise from victims passively reinforcing oppression are qualitatively different to those we associate with blameworthy oppressive behaviour. Surely, someone's mere existence in an oppressive society is distinct from intentionally encouraging and benefitting from systematic injustices.

This line of reasoning is somewhat hindered by the fact that on our structural understanding of oppression, the distinction between non-victim and victim

contributions to structural injustice is less apparent. Both groups are largely at the whim of the structures around them, and both present only one contributing factor in a sea of other factors and structures. Distinguishing between these will be less fruitful if structural injustice is attributable not to individual factors but to the wider social-structural processes.

Moreover, while some non-victims appear to engage with oppression passively, or even work actively to resist oppressive forces, at the same time, some victims engage in oppressive harms that would seem straightforwardly blameworthy if they came from a non-victim. Rather than merely passively perpetuating oppression, victims sometimes actively engage in long-term collaboration with their oppressors for self-interested purposes and with little regard for the exploitation of fellow victims. Take, for example, victim-specific oppressive harms, such as participating in tokenism in virtue of one's position as a victim of oppression, and through this, encouraging the legitimisation of oppressive treatment towards other victims (Cudd 2006, 199). If we cannot easily draw a line between non-victims and victims as contributing passively and actively to oppression, then absolving victims from the responsibility to resist would not only enable the genuine perpetuation of oppression but also introduce inconsistency with how different oppressive contributions are evaluated.

Putting aside the degree by which victims contribute to oppression, there are more general benefits to ascribing the responsibility to resist to victims. First, if oppression can only be overcome through the transformation of social-structural processes more widely, then effective resistance will require the collective resistance of *all* agents regardless of whether they are victims or not.

Second, instead of reducing victim responsibility, the fact that victims are targeted by structural injustice may give rise to additional grounds for responsibilities of resistance. Take, for example, responsibilities grounded on self-respect for one's moral standing–perhaps where oppression undermines this, resistance is necessary to acknowledge, regain and express self-respect for one's rights as a moral being (Boxill 1976, 65). Alternatively, some suggest that victims have a unique responsibility of resistance

stemming from an epistemically privileged understanding of oppression due to their deeply affected position within it. It may be that utilising this epistemic privilege to educate others is necessary to successfully overcome oppression and thus, additional grounds for responsibility (Vasanthakumar 2018).

It seems that either with or without considering the extent of victim contributions to oppression, the unfairness and limitation of oppression "is insufficient to vitiate the obligation" for victims to resist (Hay 2008, 211). In light of this, we must differentiate between illogically and problematically over-blaming victims for the existence of structural injustice, and more plausibly holding them accountable "for how they choose to respond to these conditions" (Shelby 2007, 154). In positing responsibilities for the latter, we attempt to preserve the depiction of victims as "moral persons and as [agents] in their own right" (Ibid.) by accounting for the genuine contribution they can have both to oppressive harms and to collective progress. It is unclear why even the most sympathetic considerations of victimhood should justify completely negating the basic values that ground their responsibilities to resist. The intuition that victims ought to have some form of responsibility to resist then, still stands.

1.4 Why Not Blame The Victim?

Perhaps given the role that victims play in upholding oppressive structures, we should instead dismiss the Transformative Oppression intuition. Why would oppression transform victim agency to the extent of blaming victims less than non-victims if both groups have the capacity to engage with structural injustice in similar ways? If those positing VBO are taking an overcautious and over-idealised approach to victim blaming, and victim blaming is in fact non-problematic, then VBO will have little impact on theories of resistance.

As I see it, there are two main ways to object to the Transformative Oppression intuition. Firstly, one can push back on the claim that oppressive circumstances are transformative and thus deny that blaming the victim is incorrectly cruel. Second, one can bite the bullet

on the charge of cruelty and insist that our judgements of blameworthiness need not avoid it.

While it is certainly reasonable to object to the claim that oppressive circumstances are so wholly transformative that they completely *remove* blameworthiness, the transformative oppression intuition is not committed to this, rather claiming some degree of transformative effect. Thus, denying the intuition involves denying oppression's transformative effect on agency *entirely* and in effect also denies the costs and limitations victims suffer. Given the aforementioned plethora of structural disadvantages that victims face from oppression, this argument is empirically dubious and insensitive, and not a live option I will consider within this discussion.

Beyond this, however, denying oppression's effects on victim agency raises difficulties in explaining the differences in our commonplace treatment of victims and non-victims when they appear to perform the same act. For example, consider a woman and a man – both of whom actively campaign against women pursuing careers, insisting that their place is within unpaid domestic roles. Insofar as we accept that campaigning for an oppressive norm perpetuates the harms that arise from it, both agents appear to contribute the same way to this oppressive harm.

However, in this example, the male agent straightforwardly benefits from this norm regardless of whether this motivates his activism. Access to unpaid domestic help will improve his quality of life, allowing him to focus on his career, or simply live more comfortably. Meanwhile, the female agent's relationship with this norm is more complicated. While she may prefer traditional gender roles and view domestic labour as a worthwhile purpose, through her activism, she will lose access to a variety of alternative options and resources that could have otherwise furthered her goals. Whereas the male agent can always choose to pick up domestic work, she robs herself of this flexibility. Her perpetuation of this norm thus impacts her agency in a way that does not apply to the male agent.

We also tend to view the process of victims endorsing oppressive norms with sympathy. Given that oppressive structures influence us in part by shaping the norms we take for

granted as correct and true, it is likely that victims are encouraged to endorse norms that are directly harmful to them. This may be through norms that increase the harms involved with resistance, or that falsely teach that alternatives are not possible nor beneficial. Either way, oppression affects victim agency and well-being both in strongly encouraging compliance with oppressive norms and following this, harming the victim with this compliance (Cudd 2006, 176–83; Superson 1993, 56).

Thus, if contributing to an oppressive norm is prima facie wrong, we may nevertheless respond to victims (but not non-victims) with pity or frustration over their contribution to a social-structural process that systematically disadvantages them. To be sensitive to this differentiation between how victims and non-victims relate to oppressive acts is to admit to some degree of oppressive transformation over victim agency.

Let us move on to the second strategy of biting the bullet on the charge of cruelty. This approach argues that while oppression's effects on victim agency are tragic, accommodating the Transformative Oppression claim into our responsibilities to resist is unnecessary, as the unfairness of one's social conditions "is insufficient to vitiate the obligation" (Hay 2008, 211).

There is a plausible foundation for this argument: even if we accept the cruelty of impossible responsibilities and inevitable blameworthiness, one can still deny that this goes beyond the unfortunate but mundane consequence of applying general theories to complex non-ideal realities. We face this difficulty whenever we attempt to apply moral and political theories more widely – basic theories are debated and amended in large part because there is always an undermining counterexample that exists in the world. It is impossibly demanding then for theories to be both concise and capable of twisting to fit every complex counterexample that might exist. And yet, this difficulty in applying theory does not typically derail the validity of the theory itself.

At first glance, this stance is taken by certain theories of resistance. Candice Delmas (2018), for example, acknowledges the demandingness of the responsibility to resist, but nevertheless argues that this does not render the responsibility void. She defends this by pointing to other similarly demanding responsibilities (such as obeying just laws) that

require time and effort and restrict our freedoms but that we do not consider implausible (Ibid, 102).

For Delmas, “we shouldn’t expect morality to be anything other than demanding in [our] nonideal, often-unjust circumstances” (Ibid, 192). That resisting injustice is difficult in our suboptimal situations, and that “many of us fall short of fulfilling our basic political obligations” (Ibid, 18) is an unfortunate fact or perhaps a form of bad moral luck. This is, however, insufficient to undermine the validity of the responsibility, and therefore is not something that needs accommodating for in our theories of resistance. Ultimately, Delmas seemingly sees no issue with positing responsibilities that render victims liable to blame “for refusing the burdens of addressing injustice” (Ibid, 102) even if their subjugation is “entirely involuntary” (Ibid, 193).

I concede that some of the difficulties faced when applying responsibilities to resist may come under the umbrella of applying ideal theory to nonideal reality, and thus not pose a specific threat to theories of resistance. Nevertheless, I believe that the way oppression impacts victim agency is morally salient even beyond this general concern.

All agents have limited time and resources to pursue a conflicting set of responsibilities that cannot all be completed. We have, at any point, a choice between resistance and pursuing our own goals (career progression, taking care of our family etc). While choosing the latter is understandable, this act of self-interest at the risk of perpetuating oppressive harm is often viewed as blameworthy in some sense. In this case, our general business is not enough to dissolve our responsibilities even when we have no sway over how many hours there are in a day.

Notably, however, victims of oppression face an additional factor restricting their ability to fulfil their moral responsibilities beyond the regular limitations of agency: oppression itself. The result is a malignant cycle that should not be conflated with the mundane difficulties of nonideal contexts. Rather, it is morally salient that oppressive circumstances render it implausible for victims to fulfil their responsibilities to resist, only for this failure to further reinforce these circumstances. It is more accurate then, to depict victims of oppression as occupying an additional double bind between “resisting

oppression by sacrificing one's well-being, valuable aims and relationships" (Harvey 2010, 18–19), or prioritising self-interested survival while accepting moral failure.

It is onerous for a theory of resistance to maintain this double bind. Positing a responsibility one is doomed to fail, or one that requires immense self-sacrifice to fulfil renders utilising the theory substantially more difficult. For example, oversaturating judgements of blameworthiness reduces the set of tools we have to describe and understand the variety of ways people interact with their responsibility. Similarly, we are likely to face a wider set of cases where the evaluation the theory offers appears counterintuitive.

In practice, if overly blaming responsibilities become the norm, victims making related moral decisions will likely face increased decision fatigue and guilt over their perceived moral failures despite arguably living to the best of their reasonable moral ability. Other agents may take judgements of blameworthiness as a license to blame these victims further, compounding and even attempting to justify the disadvantaged social positions they hold. This risks turning the responsibility to resist into a demand for victims to define their entire identities around resisting oppression, something that is not asked of non-victims despite arguably suffering fewer limitations for resistance (Harvey 2010, 18).

Thus, contrary to being merely a regrettable but justified element of nonideal justice, the cruelty of "forcing [victims], through no fault of their own, into profoundly difficult normative conflicts" (Srinivasan 2018, 14) indicates a transformation of our moral systems into a kind of second-order or psychological form of oppression (Bartky 2015). Each decision to resist becomes yet another burden aimed disproportionately towards morally conscientious victims. Enabling this within our theories of resistance allows oppression to harm its victims by removing their resources, before perniciously harming them again on the grounds of not having these resources to resist. This risk of turning our responsibilities into oppressive tools is a genuine reason to take VBO's charge of cruelty seriously.

Upon closer inspection, it would be a misinterpretation to view Delmas' theory of resistance as genuinely dismissing the need to avoid cruel victim blaming. While not

explicitly stated, Delmas takes several steps to amend her theory to accommodate for oppression's transformative effect and distance herself from objections of cruelty. For one, she attempts to distinguish between 'blaming the victim' used in a pejorative sense and victim blameworthiness as a morally neutral concept. To support this, she introduces several caveats to the responsibility of resistance. As an example, she conceives of our responsibility to resist as "general and imperfect" (2018, 18) giving us "discretion as to when and how to discharge [this responsibility]" (Ibid.) and rendering the responsibility defeasible by "countervailing prudential and moral considerations" (Ibid, 177). These tools aim to create distance between theoretical blameworthiness and whether an individual is actually liable to blame, allowing her theory to posit strong responsibilities to resist while lessening the severity of the blame associated.

Regardless of whether Delmas' approach is successful, what matters here is Delmas is clearly motivated to avoid cruelty with her theory of resistance. She is not rejecting the concerns of VBO but rather actively introducing elements in an attempt to resolve it by striking a balance where victims can be blameworthy for failures to resist without being subject to problematic victim blaming. I expect this to be the case for most theories of resistance - in any case, it is likely more demanding for a theory to genuinely bite the bullet on the cruelty of Victim Blaming than to consider a way to accommodate oppression's effects on victim agency. As such, while it is tempting for some degree of VBO to be chalked up to the inevitable difficulties of applying theories to non-ideal circumstances, nevertheless, there is more at play when it comes to the pernicious cycle of blame and suffering that oppression creates.

1.5 Victim Agency and Our Key Claims

In this chapter, I have attempted to motivate the worry surrounding the Victim Blaming Objection (VBO). In doing so, I have outlined my use of the notions of oppression, victimhood, and value to establish our baseline assumptions. I have explored how theories of resistance face complications when applying responsibilities to resist to

victims of oppression. These complications arise from an apparent conflict between the Functioning Agency and Transformative Oppression intuitions.

At this point, I believe it is reasonable to claim that for a theory of resistance to convincingly apply to the domain of oppressive victimhood and combat the prevailing worry of VBO, both intuitions must be taken seriously. With this in mind, let us proceed assuming that theories of resistance must accommodate our two intuitions-turned-claims:

> *[A] Functioning Agency Claim:* victims are, on the whole, functioning moral agents for which moral responsibilities (including the prima facie responsibility to resist) are plausibly appropriate

> *[B] Transformative Oppression Claim:* oppressive circumstances justify granting victims some kind of special consideration regarding their blameworthiness for non-resistance

As discussed, as neither can be convincingly dismissed outright, the demandingness of balancing these two competing claims pushes theories of resistance to make substantial adaptations to accommodate this. I will use the term 'frameworks' to refer to the tools (concepts, argumentative moves, etc.) with which these adaptations are made. On this understanding, it is the framework that does the argumentative work to accommodate both claims into a given theory of resistance to avoid VBO. For example, in the case of Delmas mentioned in §1.4, the caveats she introduces using the concept of 'general and imperfect duties' would be considered the relevant frameworks within her larger theory of resistance.

To an extent, frameworks can often be isolated and discussed without examining the rest of the theory, i.e. what grounds the responsibility to resist more generally. This is the case for Delmas, where the frameworks sit as additional arguments or methodologies, but not for other theories that build their accommodations of victim responsibility into their core concepts. Take, for example, Daniel Silvermint (2013), who in grounding the responsibility to resist in victim wellbeing, argues that the responsibility is itself nullified on the same grounds if it would result in a net decrease in victim wellbeing. In this case, the core concept and framework are one and the same.

Nevertheless, in the following chapters, I intend to evaluate the frameworks specifically used to resolve VBO rather than the wider theories of responsibilities to resist. Doing so acknowledges the possibility that: one, different theories can adopt the same or similar frameworks; two, what is core to one theory may be a mere framework in another; and three, a theory can feasibly make use of several frameworks at once.

Most importantly, the approach of evaluating frameworks rather than theories allows us to examine ways of tackling victim responsibility without committing ourselves to analysing or defending particular theories of resistance or developing frameworks into fully-fledged theories. At the same time, it facilitates the pairing of chosen effective frameworks with whatever theory of resistance one considers plausibly compatible. Even to start, setting up a more flexible and pluralistic attitude to ethical problem-solving is particularly helpful within the highly nuanced context of oppressive victimhood.

In this thesis, I will limit my scope to examining two such frameworks: the 'Excuses Framework' in Chapter 2 and the 'Structural Responsibility Framework' in Chapter 3. While these two frameworks are by no means exhaustive, given that I have so far largely discussed oppression in terms of how it affects victim agency, I consider these two to be conventional and intuitive agency-based frameworks to explore. I classify these two as agency-based frameworks because their means of balancing responsibility and blameworthiness is largely by re-conceptualising agency under oppression.

Despite this similarity, they offer very different solutions to VBO. At first glance, the Excuses Framework argues that coercion and ignorance are excusing factors largely for victims but not non-victims. This rejects the claim that lessening blameworthiness for victims will result in non-victims (and people in general) escaping blameworthiness. Instead, oppressive circumstances are presented as the differing grounds that justify victims and non-victims not being judged on the same grounds. On the other hand, the Structural Responsibility Framework takes the approach of biting the bullet on non-blameworthiness for both victims and non-victims. To make this more palatable, it introduces an alternative responsibility that allows us to discuss and combat oppression without associating failure to resist with blameworthiness – rejecting the implication that

removing blameworthiness removes meaningful discussion of responsibilities to resist. To focus our discussion, in the next two chapters, I will assume our frameworks are, themselves, more or less plausible as my focal point will be examining the feasibility of *applying* them to victim responsibilities to resist.

As alluded to previously, the direction of my inquiry should not imply that only agency-based frameworks offer options for amending responsibilities to resist. Other frameworks may work to resolve VBO, for example by widening the range of acts that count as resistance, factoring in leniencies to lessen victim blameworthiness, or building the responsibility to resist from the ground up to consider the circumstances of oppressive victimhood. I am merely focusing on two agency-based approaches to limit my scope and attempt to draw out insight from this more specific area.

Ultimately, my examination in Chapters 2 and 3 will reveal that while the Excuses Framework and the Structural Responsibility Framework offer crucial insights into what victim agency under oppression *can* be like, they do not paint a complete picture of it. Both end up being unconvincing in their attempts to balance responsibility and blameworthiness. In Chapter 4, I will further examine why this might be; extrapolating from how both frameworks fall short to offer a novel re-framing of responsibilities of resistance themselves. Rather than starting from blame and resolving over-blameworthiness by accommodating a *lesser* form of victim agency into responsibilities of resistance, I suggest we begin from the fact of imperfect agency before grounding our responsibilities around what resistance is actually achievable. The upshot of this is a depiction of responsibilities to resist as ongoing practices we maintain and develop over time rather than finite sets of actions we must complete. This lends itself to a formative approach, leaning away from blameworthiness and instead giving individual agents authority over whether they have resisted appropriately. To accompany this, I suggest a variety of tools facilitating collaborative, ongoing and non-hierarchical discussions as a means of feedback and guidance towards genuine structural change. I believe re-framing responsibilities to resist this way conceptualises victim agency in a more accurate and respectful manner, and offers a more feasible way of manoeuvring VBO.

Chapter 2 – Impaired Agency and Excuses

2.1 Coercion and Ignorance in Oppressive Society

The Excuses Framework is an intuitive starting point when arguing that an otherwise responsible agent ought to be spared from blame in a particular situation. Excuses draw upon an act's context to argue for "the standing presumption of blame-worthiness" (Rosen 2004, 298) to be temporarily overturned without "calling into question [the agent's] status as a generally responsible agent" (Talbert 2019). A classic case involves an individual's circumstances temporarily impairing their agency, causing a breakdown of control over a morally problematic act. I will examine two examples of agency-limiting and potentially excusing circumstances in turn: coercive influence and moral/epistemic ignorance. Note that these two are indicative of the most commonly discussed excusing circumstances but are in no way exhaustive of them.

Roughly speaking, coercive influence involves pressure of some form - such as a threat - being exerted to place the agent in a moral dilemma wherein both options are morally undesirable, pushing the agent into performing an act they otherwise would not have. This renders them unable to meaningfully exercise their will over the outcome of the situation, representing a deterioration of choice and ownership over one's actions. As this kind of freedom of choice often underpins moral responsibility, when these are removed, the justification for blameworthiness for the morally undesirable outcome is weakened as well. Granted, acts of varying severity (of harm caused for example) likely require different degrees of coercive influence to be excused. Nevertheless, where this influence is severe enough for the act to be "beyond one's control or willpower to prevent" (Anderson 2017), the coercive constraint on the agent's freedom may render them excused from blame for the act or its consequences.

A paradigmatic example would be an agent who, under the threat of a loved one being shot, drives a bank robber away from the scene of the crime. Plausibly, in this situation it is unreasonable to demand that the agent deny the bank robber and allow the loved one to die, prompting the intuition that the coercion present is an excusing circumstance. We

can also consider more nuanced examples of structural coercion. Imagine an agent living pay-check to pay-check to support her children due to a struggling job market, working-class background and lack of education opportunities. She is the only one who observes a bank robbery but knows that if she stays to intervene, she will be fired from her job and be unable to feed and house her children. Here, while coercion stems from structural factors rather than a malicious individual, there is something to the claim that she should be excused for enabling this bank robber.

Oppression has a strong coercive influence on its victims. Crucially, it burdens them by depriving them of "psychological, social, epistemic and capital resources" (Vasanthakumar 2020, 5). At a basic level, this renders everyday acts more difficult (Card 2000, 518), putting the needs of self-preservation (food, money and so on) in apparent conflict with any other costly activities, in particular, gaining security and safety (Silvermint 2018a, 36). This raises the relative costs of potentially risky actions, since, if a victim is penalised or harmed, they are less likely to have the resources to overcome this. Resistance, in particular, becomes a higher-cost action for victims often to the extent of being "dangerous or counterproductive" (Hay 2011, 29).

Beyond the increase in costs, these situations also foster feelings of stress and fear for victims of oppression. This encourages dependence on whatever support or security systems they are able to find even if these systems are oppressive themselves. Take, for example, a housewife who endorses her husband denying her access to financial and social independence. Despite the limiting nature of this treatment, it may still represent the best option if her alternatives are even worse. Perhaps she was not able to pursue formal education and would struggle to support herself financially if she left. She may also face ostracization or harm from her community and support system upon renouncing their norms. This lack of options and the threat of being left unprotected no doubt creates pressure to comply with the oppressive status quo (Superson 1993, 48). Thus, even in situations where compliance appears self-interested, "rational, informed, and fully free" (Ibid, 50) choices to do so are plausibly still constrained by the surrounding oppressive context. While not as straightforwardly coercive as the getaway driver example, I believe

the oppression's potential for coercive influence through increased pressure and insecurity is apparent.

With this established, let us move on to the excusing circumstance of ignorance. Excuses from ignorance are founded on the idea that "it is unfair to blame someone for doing something if he blamelessly believes that there is no compelling moral reason not to do it" (Rosen 2003, 74). This can take the form of epistemic ignorance: where the agent is unaware of a relevant *non-moral* fact about the situation; or moral ignorance: unawareness of a relevant *moral* fact. For both, it is key that the relevant facts do not inform the act in the way necessary for the agent to have fully exercised their agency. It is this disconnect that gives rise to plausible excusing circumstances.

An example of epistemic ignorance would be an agent that accidentally puts arsenic in someone's tea, mistaking it for sugar because someone else replaced the contents of the container. Assuming the agent isn't aware of this replacement, did not intend to poison anyone and would not have poisoned them if they had known, describing the act as 'poisoning someone' can be much less meaningfully ascribed to the agent than the description of 'attempting to put sugar in tea'. It thus seems inappropriate to hold the agent blameworthy for the former act (Rosen 2004, 299).

Moral ignorance on the other hand often comes in the form of agents who, having been brought up learning a set of moral principles, find that these are considered problematic upon re-evaluation in a different moral community. Take, for example, the trope of elderly relatives holding morally wrong views about minority groups, say, believing they hold lesser moral status or worth. These agents are otherwise rational individuals who function generally as members of our moral community. Nevertheless, where someone was not adequately taught to appreciate the wrongness of these beliefs and the acts that stem from them, this may prompt us to excuse this behaviour on the grounds of 'not knowing better' or 'having outdated views' (Wolf 1980, 159–60). Granted, insofar as our moral principles have shifted towards the equal respect of minority groups, moral agents may simply be expected to understand this. Excuses from moral ignorance may therefore be more contentious than those from epistemic ignorance.

Oppression fosters ignorance predominantly by obscuring an agent's knowledge of the options available to them, influencing how they come to value these options and ultimately projecting falsehoods about their own oppressive circumstances. This occurs through the internalisation of oppressive norms in which principles that uphold oppression get embedded into our everyday social norms (i.e. our beauty standards, social etiquette, and so on). For example, values surrounding white western features may permeate our aesthetic principles on what features are beautiful. Over time, being socialised within these norms prompts us to internalise them as morally good or neutral facts – i.e. that white features = beautiful.

As we continue to exist within internalised oppressive norms, we naturally (and often un-reflexively) build our own beliefs and preferences around these assumed norms. The resulting set of views are often referred to as 'adaptive preferences' – preferences that form in response to the (oppressive) circumstances beyond our full awareness (Elster 1983b as cited in Cudd 2006, 189). While these adaptive preferences can remain minor aspects of our personality, they can also become an "integral part of [one's] personal identity" (Superson 1993, 48). In these latter cases, through internalising oppressive norms, victims can come to "rationalise and support their [own] dominance" (Cudd 2006, 176), endorsing "the very interpretive practices and conventions that stand in need of correction" (Jugov and Ypi 2019, 11).

These effects render it substantially harder for both the agent and outside observers to accurately evaluate oppressive norms and identify whether the victim's endorsement represents genuine exercising of the agent's will. Victim testimony on what options are available, whether these are personally beneficial (Hay 2011, 24–26), what structures are responsible for their oppression, and even whether they are oppressed at all (Silvermint 2018a, 36), can become distorted. Without this information, victims can be made less able to "adequately weigh short-term against long-term interests" (Superson 1993, 48), discouraging them from pursuing "goods and even needs that, absent those conditions, they would want" (Cudd 2006, 181).

Specific to epistemic ignorance, this influence is further bolstered by the constant undermining of victim rationality, achieved through the disproportionate deprivation of the resources necessary to grow as knowledge-seekers (i.e. education, nutrition), and the higher risk of epistemically detrimental phenomena including trauma, gaslighting and so on (Hay 2011, 25–26). Taken altogether, these factors can hinder victims' abilities to exercise and develop their rational capacities against ignorance. In comparison to the accidental poisoning scenario, a case of epistemic ignorance might involve victims who choose not to resist an oppressive norm out of the mistaken belief that the norm fosters a better environment for victims.

Note that the analysis of epistemic ignorance is complicated by the fact that, through their lived experiences of oppression, victims may have additional access to epistemic standpoints of victimhood that grant empirical knowledge about how oppression and oppressive wrongs are experienced that are unavailable to non-victims (See Harding 1991). This suggests that, while victims may be epistemically disadvantaged as a whole by oppression, there can be areas in which they hold certain epistemic *advantages* in virtue of their victimhood.

Moral ignorance is fostered much the same way with reduced resources and internalised oppression degrading awareness of relevant moral facts. Some victims may not be sufficiently exposed to socially progressive principles and concepts of oppression (1993, 54). Without this, they may lack the moral tools needed to understand their victimhood, never mind grasp the existence of any responsibilities of resistance. Even as understanding of oppression becomes more mainstream, engaging in nuanced moral critique on the topic may nevertheless involve a specialist set of moral knowledge. We may, for example, understand that rape is wrong, but struggle to grasp our responsibilities in cases of less flagrant sexual harassment. Insofar as sufficiently understanding oppression requires supplementary "moral re-education" (Calhoun 1989, 398), the necessary moral principles may be inaccessible to individuals in particularly socially conservative communities. Where victims have not yet had substantial opportunity to unlearn internalised moral beliefs in favour of oppression, their failures to resist may be excused on grounds of moral ignorance.

In reality, coercion and ignorance often overlap, compounding their impact on agency. Anita Superson (1993) presents 'right-wing women' who endorse sexist values and oppressive compliance as cases of severely restricted choices "between a traditional lifestyle that (they believe) promises security and survival, and one that seems to threaten their own survival" (Ibid, 55). This perspective can be interpreted any number of ways: as a true belief about their coercive situations in the face of high costs of resistance; a false belief stemming from epistemic ignorance of their situation (i.e. they have more resources than they believe); an undervaluing of the moral goods of resistance; or as any combination of the three. Regardless, insofar as we accept oppressive circumstances can be coercive or ignorance-fostering, we will likely be sympathetic to the claim that some victims – those in particularly oppressive circumstances - may be excused from blame on the same grounds as our getaway driver and poisoning cases.

In sum, this ability to excuse victims but not non-victims from blame is how the excuses framework attempts to balance the Functioning Agency claim and the Transformative Oppression claim. If the oppressive circumstances provide meaningful differentiation between non-victims and victims, then while on principle we consider both groups blameworthy on the same grounds, in practice the significantly different conditions justify different judgements. This allows us to apply excuses selectively and avoid needlessly blaming those most oppressed while still insisting on the existence of the general responsibility to resist oppression.

To examine this approach to VBO, I will consider three objections. The first argues that coercive influence and ignorance do *not* sufficiently differentiate between victims and non-victims within oppression. The second and third will argue that the excuses framework cannot and should not (respectively) be applied to a substantial enough set of victims to meet the nuanced explanatory demands of accommodating the variety of victim agency that exists.

2.2 Objection 1 – Difficulties with Differentiation

Let us examine the first objection: that the excuses framework does not effectively differentiate between victims and non-victims. Even if victims as a group are disproportionately affected by oppressive *harms*, oppression's coercive and ignorance-cultivating effects also appear to influence non-victims in similar ways simply in virtue of their agency being developed within the norms of an oppressive society. Moreover, given that the extent of this influence will vary between individuals within each group, it may not always be the case that a victim has stronger grounds for excuses than a non-victim.

For example, men raised within a sexist society may internalise patriarchal norms that associate men with reason and women with emotion despite these same norms being largely detrimental to male wellbeing. By disincentivising men to engage with their emotions, this norm restricts their ability to openly discuss and process their emotional concerns, in turn threatening to remove several valuable options for men including invalidating certain 'expressive' careers, discouraging affective expressions, and deterring men from sources of emotional support (i.e. therapy).

If we accept that excusing factors can sometimes apply to non-victims, then the excuses framework does not selectively lessen the burden of blameworthiness on victims but rather applies to agents within oppressive society more widely. At best, widespread excuses from blameworthiness risk undermining the obligatoriness of the responsibility to resist. At worst, we run the risk of more counterintuitive applications of excuses, such as blaming victims who are *more* aware of their experienced harms than oblivious non-victims ignorant of their moral wrongdoings (suggesting that non-victims are rewarded for their ignorance). Either way, this complication undermines using the excuses framework as a clear differentiator between victims and non-victims and thus may threaten its approach to resolving VBO.

One can push back on this, arguing that despite similarities in how oppression affects the choices of victims and non-victims, this treatment is in some way distinct maintaining the differentiation between the two. One point of distinction is scale; oppressive structures by our definition concentrate disadvantages towards certain groups - 'victims' – including the limitation of resources and options, granting stronger grounds for excuses from

coercion and ignorance. This does not mean that non-victims will necessarily experience less coercion or ignorance than victims, merely that their agency will be less affected as a whole.

The distinction of scale is relatively uncontroversial given that the victim-blaming objection already commits to the claim that oppression treats victims and non-victims differently on some level. While oppression may limit *some* choices for non-victims, they are, in a systematic sense, benefitted on the whole by oppressive society both relative to victims in a scalar sense as well as crucially often directly at the expense of victims (Superson 1993, 56). In the case of the aforementioned limitations men experience from certain patriarchal norms, it is still the case that patriarchal society is built overwhelmingly to favour them. Ultimately, their association with rationality strictly elevates them above women on the social hierarchy – with this comes an inherent difference in how the groups of agents are treated in terms of their rational capacities, associated rights and ability of self-determination.

Building on this, if the degree of coercion or ignorance required to excuse different acts varies, then acknowledging that non-victims experiencing *some* choice-affecting effects of oppression does not necessitate excusing them for more serious oppressive harms. This way, we can use the Excuses Framework to accommodate oppression's influence on the agency for both victims and non-victims while nevertheless distinguishing between the two in terms of what oppressive wrongs they are excused for.

This leads us to an alternative to insisting on a distinction between victims and non-victims. Instead, one can bite the bullet and accept that *some* non-victims can be as susceptible to coercive/ignorance-fostering influences as *some* victims and thus that we should apply excuses across groups based on individual circumstances. One can argue that it is an error to blindly excuse victims only based on their group membership, as this counterintuitively prioritises this over the actual experiences individual agents have within oppressive structures. Even concerning VBO, the reasoning for finding over-blaming problematic is presumably the placement of unnecessary blame on those who suffer the most. Whilst these are typically victims (informing the direction of our inquiry),

insofar as non-victims experience a similar level of oppressive influence, it may simply be the case that avoiding over-blaming is relevant more widely. What matters to the distinction of blameworthy and non-blameworthy and in this case, excused and non-excused is not whether an agent is grouped into the victim or non-victim categories but rather their actual individual experience of agency-limiting oppressive influences. Our previous avoidance of excusing non-victims from failing to resist is in fact a misinterpretation of an underlying desire to avoid excusing *all* agents as a means of maintaining the meaningfulness of the responsibility to resist.

With this response, I believe the prospect of excusing not only victims but also some non-victims is more palatable than originally expected. This is aided by the ongoing assumption that oppression's choice-limiting effects disproportionately disadvantage victims as a group, and thus an excuses framework that applies to all agents will still more frequently excuse the failures of resistance from victims than non-victims. Regardless, by using the degree of oppressive influence on an individual level as a non-arbitrary distinction between failures of resistance that can and cannot be appropriately excused from blameworthiness, there can still be a sense in which some agents can be meaningfully blameworthy for failing to resist. With this in mind, while comparisons of coercion and ignorance between victims and non-victims may remain contentious, I believe the Excuses Framework can overcome its difficulties with differentiation.

2.3 Objection 2 – Excuses as Inapplicable

The second objection to the Excuses Framework is that in practice, it cannot be applied to enough cases of victimhood to sufficiently account for the claim that victims as a group are due special consideration as a result of oppression's transformative effects. This argument draws on the principle that not all coercive and ignorance-cultivating situations constitute excusing circumstances. In addition to requiring a certain degree of severity relative to the action in question, the coercive/ignorance-fostering influence must hold a certain relation to one's agency to establish grounds for excuses. There are a variety of

differing accounts of what this relation is exactly and what conditions must be met to achieve it; I will not attempt to identify the best option. Rather I will assume the common principle that an agent is culpable for an action done from coercion or ignorance if they are culpable for being in that state in the first place, in other words, if they had the ability to avoid or overcome this influence.

Examining coercion, we can point out that coercive pressure does not excuse in cases where regardless of the influence, the agent would have nevertheless chosen the act in question. While coercion may be related here, because of the overdetermined nature of the act, it seems implausible to treat the agent as if their act was against their will the way that excuses typically suggest. Thus, the mere presence of coercive pressure does not necessarily erode the agency that we associate with potential blameworthiness.

Adding to the lack of clarity, in cases of structural coercion, Ann Cudd (2006, 197–201) points out that in practice, there is rarely a clear starting point in which coercion overrules agency. Rather, the relationship between coercion and agency is nuanced, with coercive pressure forming a constant background feature that agency develops within. Choice and coercion thus often overlap, with many agents choosing and reinforcing their own coercive circumstances. This makes it harder to identify whether a particular act is sufficiently influenced by coercion or not.

The upshot of these complications is that while victims who perpetuate oppression through compliance are likely affected by oppressive influence, this does not necessitate that these acts are excusable failures of agency. In fact, given our Functioning Agency claim, most victims who appear capable of rational deliberation between various valuable choices may not qualify for being for their failures of resistance despite the presence of this oppressive influence. This would reduce the application of excuses to only the most vulnerable of victims wherein oppression has resulted in a complete denial of resources, alternatives, and awareness of resistance.

The case for most victims exhibiting substantial levels of agency is furthered by the fact that many within disadvantaged groups nevertheless take an active role in resistance, from acts of intentioned self-preservation and supporting others in their community, to

fully-fledged acts of traditional activism. At the same time, other victims appear to utilise their agency to enact oppressive harm, choosing to enact greater harm to others to further their own self-interest rather than merely passively non-resisting. While the option to create *zero* harm might not be available due to coercive influences, victims do at times choose to enact superfluous harm in ways within their control. We can see this where members of oppressed groups have found themselves in positions of power either in institutional roles or affluent backgrounds, but use these resources to directly collude with 'oppressors' and suppress upwards mobility for others in their group. These cases suggest that sometimes, oppressive influence - while related – does not interfere sufficiently with the victim's agency to excuse their actions.

In the case of ignorance, agents can be culpable for their ignorance if, despite being generally morally or epistemically competent and having the ability to avoid the fact-obscuring influence, they willingly fail to engage with their moral/epistemic capacities and cultivate their own ignorance (Talbert 2019). They might have neglected the option of accessing available resources, considering other perspectives, engaging in self-reflection or "applying accepted moral canons (e.g., against exploiting others) to cases not covered, or incorrectly covered, in the social stock of moral knowledge" (Calhoun 1989, 394).

Consider an alternative accidental poisoning example where the agent mistakes arsenic for sugar because they negligently keep both containers unlabelled on the same shelf, or because despite being labelled, the agent uses it anyway because they reject the expertise of scientists on the harms of arsenic poisoning. In these cases, the role the agent plays in their own ignorance renders them much more likely to be blameworthy for the poisoning (Miller 2019).

Similarly, despite reduced access to moral/epistemic resources, many victims remain morally and epistemically capable. This suggests a degree of wilful ignorance, as is seen in Lee Wilson's (2021) analysis of prominent anti-suffragettes. Wilson argues that empirical evidence suggests that far from a moral/epistemic breakdown, some anti-suffragettes "actively acquired and maintained [ignorance]" (Ibid, 3) through "the vices of

testimonial injustice […] and wilful refusal to acknowledge epistemic tools developed by marginalised groups" (Ibid, 11).

In modern-day cases, resources for epistemic and moral development are more accessible, with an increased availability of free educational resources online and the general shift in public awareness of oppression. Many contemporary victims of oppression may therefore be capable of escaping epistemic and moral ignorance, by "learning a new moral language and new moral reasoning skills [to rise] above their social conditioning" (Calhoun 1989, 405). This suggests that there is a relatively higher likelihood that current ignorance from victims is wilful, at least compared to Wilson's anti-suffragette examples.

In reality, across both coercion and ignorance, the relationship between oppression and most cases of victim agency is more accurately represented as victims "'do[ing] their part' to reflect, reason, visualise, anticipate—*intend*—and meaningfully act according to their intention" (Bierria 2014, 135). While agents are undoubtedly constrained by their oppressive circumstances, they often make at least partially rational, informed and self-interested choices, including when they comply with oppression (Cudd 2006, 197). If we accept this description of victim agency, then the Functioning Agency claim should not only present victims as agents before and after their failures of resistance, but also *during* the act itself. Acts of compliance are therefore not temporary lapses in agency as the Excuses Framework would suggest, but instead one in many ways that this agency is expressed. This does not mean that they are perpetrators *rather* than victims – rather, it is a key feature of oppression to create social-structural processes in which it is rational for victims to exercise their agency against their own long-term interests. Ultimately, the implication is that the Excuses Framework is inapplicable to the vast majority of victims of oppression, undermining its relevance as a convincing solution to VBO.

2.4 Objection 3 – Excuses as Problematic

A third objection to the Excuses Framework is the ameliorative claim that the framework *should not* be widely applied to victims of oppression, and that doing so would raise

problematic implications, a key one being the risk this poses to sanctioning failures to resist. Note the distinction between the previous objection and this, with the former focused on whether the framework *can* be widely applied.

The risk regarding sanctioning failures to resist is largely concerned with undermining the obligatoriness of responsibilities to resist. For insight into how this sanctioning could occur, we can look towards Cheshire Calhoun's (1989) discussion of moral ignorance. Crucially, Calhoun distinguishes between ignorance in normal and abnormal contexts. In normal contexts, ignorance to the degree of being excused is uncommon, caused by some "atypical defect" (Ibid, 395) against a background of a non-ignorant society. The rarity of ignorance as an excuse maintains the obligatory nature of the responsibility in question; the ability to easily avoid blame by pleading ignorance would otherwise undermine this. For Calhoun, ignorance-as-excusing is "necessarily exceptional" (Ibid.) in the normal context.

By contrast, in *abnormal* contexts, ignorance is encouraged through the wrong action being socially accepted. In these cases, citing the relevant oppressive influences as excusing conditions for the moral wrong directly maintain ignorance and perpetuates the wrongdoing. One way it does this is by presenting failures to fulfil the responsibility as a "social ill" (Ibid, 403) rather than a failing one can control. However, as discussed, there is often a two-way perpetuating relationship between oppressive influences and individual actions, with the continued participation in ignorance and wrongdoing largely sustaining these social practices. For one, the way we analyse interactions between agents and oppressive influences is "not just descriptive but also reality constructing" (Ibid, 404). By repeatedly using certain concepts, we form social identities in the common consciousness that we then default to when conceptualising the moral wrong in question. For example, normalising excuses for failing to fulfil responsibilities can push us to view those who fail as helplessly influenced and those who don't as "exceptionally enlightened [...] heroic, supererogatory, and hence deserving gratitude" (Ibid, 403). These identities shift our expectations away from viewing the responsibilities as obligatory duties,

undermining the moral wrongness of the failure and potentially hindering our motivation towards the responsibility.

The result of this is that in abnormal contexts, normalising the excusing of wrongdoing on the grounds of socially encouraged ignorance not only prevents us from tackling a prevalent contributing factor to the wrongdoing, but also "obscure[es] the individual's role in sustaining and, potentially, disrupting" (Ibid, 402) these social practices. This is particularly dangerous given that where ignorance is widespread, using it to ground excuses will involve freely absolving large groups from blameworthiness. It is this frequency that ultimately breaks down the distinction between the responsibility as obligatory and supererogatory, turning the excusing force into a sanctioning one by interfering with wider progress against the wrongdoing (Ibid.).

In defence of a wider application of excuses, Jean Harvey suggests that it is overly hasty to surmise from excusing most failures to do X that we cannot sustain the obligatoriness of X. She argues that this argument neglects our abilities to improve our agential capacities "gradually over time" (2010, 24). It may be that we are obliged to *pursue* this improvement, but that we can excuse those still in the early stages of developing towards this. In this way, obligation and mass-excuses may be compatible.

I do not believe this defence is successful. First, even if we view agency as involving continual development, if we apply excuses widely on these grounds, there will still be victims who do not pursue this development. Some agents wilfully neglect their responsibilities of resistance, comfortable with ignoring the call to improve entirely – for these cases I consider it overly generous to claim they are committed to gradual agential improvement as Harvey suggests. Doing so blurs the differentiations we can and want to make within the wide spectrum of how agents act within oppression.

As an additional concern, suggesting that victims of oppression can be depicted en masse as occupying 'early stages' of development takes on an uncomfortably patronising tone. This is despite Harvey's insistence that this depiction can apply outside of parent-child style relationships. However, excusing victims this way goes beyond suggesting they lack relevant resources, to suggesting that they cannot even be expected to search for them.

Victims are presented as helpless; ruled by foreign desires, beliefs and other outside forces to the extent of inevitable pathology rather than being “full moral persons” (Shelby 2007, 154). This directly clashes with our Functioning Agency claim by counterintuitively presenting large groups of otherwise capable adult agents as agentially broken.

Perhaps this concern of patronising paternalism can be resolved by arguing that coercion and ignorance are not excusing conditions but rather justifying ones. Both excuses and justifications draw on an agent’s circumstances to explain why their moral failures do not warrant blameworthiness. However, while excuses typically represent a temporary impairment of agency, justifications depict the circumstances changing the situation itself such that a prima facie wrongdoing becomes morally permissible (Agule 2020, 1007). If coercion and ignorance *justify* non-resistance rather than excusing it, then perhaps we do not need to understand the agent’s act as a failure of agency, potentially avoiding the unfavourable paternalism of wide-spread absolution of blameworthiness.

However, this justification alternative does not get far, largely due to being substantially more demanding than the Excuses Framework. Justifying failures to resist argues that complying with oppressive norms and perpetuating their associated harms is not merely allowed but in fact morally *correct*. In this case, lessening the concern of paternalism comes at the cost of exacerbating the sanctioning of oppression. Moreover, the concern of inapplicability would remain salient, as the severity of coercive or ignorance-fostering influences would either need to be even higher to now justify these harms, or we would have to accept increasingly counterintuitive cases in which low levels of coercion/ignorance would have the power to justify oppressive behaviour.

2.5 Excuses as a Framework

I believe that, unlike the differentiation objection, the latter two objections around whether the Excuses Framework can and should be widely applied to victims pose serious difficulties. In both, we see that the prevalence of ignorance and coercion within oppressive circumstances makes *excusing* victims easily slip into *exempting* victims from

blame. Whereas excuses represent a temporary lapse in agency, exemption alleviates blameworthiness by arguing that the individual in question is simply not the kind of being for which this responsibility applies (Watson 1987 [2004] as cited in Talbert 2019). While this distinction can in theory be drawn, the application of excuses across the ever-present influences of oppression commits us to excusing victims so frequently, we risk exempting them from blame as a whole. This blurs the line between the two, representing a stark departure from the Functioning Agency claim.

These issues are further highlighted when we adopt an intersectional perspective of oppression. We have been using the label 'victim' to refer to those within systematically disadvantaged groups on any one of the *many* axes of societal power structures. 'Victims of oppression' therefore refers to a large majority of individuals in the world, as many will occupy at least one axis of disadvantage. This is despite the fact that many will also occupy positions of privilege on other societal axes, and with this will have access to various agency-enriching resources and opportunities. Take, for example, middle-class white women, who will experience disadvantages on the axes of gender alongside advantages on the axes of class and race.

Trying to excuse victims as a group would either misapply on a large scale or involve dismantling the agency of large swathes of the moral community and in turn, undermine the philosophical concepts and theories that assume this agency. With this in mind, it may be more fitting to conceive of oppression's undeniable impact on agency not as a disabling one granting excuses en masse, but rather as creating "'channels' for the actions of individuals, guiding and constraining them in certain directions" (Young 2011, 53). This alternative depiction would present oppression's influence as one of *shaping* agency through the structuring of possibilities, simultaneously enabling and disabling action.

The takeaway is not that excuses are *never* applicable. Where the extent and the type of coercion and ignorance caused by oppression fits, excuses may be a vital additional tool in capturing one aspect of living within oppressive structures – that of genuine agential breakdown. It is likely then, that excuses can and should be used alongside a successful account of victim responsibility. Importantly, however, applied en masse, the Excuses

Framework paints too broad a brushstroke to be useful in understanding victim agency, offering victims the relief of escaping blame at the unreasonable cost of denying their agency (Agule 2020, 1019). In its current state, all the Excuses Framework can provide is the explanation for why victims can be compromised in their agency and that for these cases, blameworthiness may not be appropriate. While one way forward may be to identify a middle ground between over-application and inapplicability, this would likely require a supplementary framework. This suggests that a successful framework in solving VBO must not only illustrate that there are ways to sever or suppress the link between responsibility to resist and blameworthiness, but also provide the explanatory tools to understand *when* and *why* failing to resist is not blameworthy.

Chapter 3 – Amending Agency and Structural Responsibility

3.1 Young's Social Connection Model

Moving on to our second framework, we have the structural responsibility framework, largely derived from Iris Marion Young's (2011) Social Connection Model ('SCM') and the theories that build from her work. Despite also drawing on the relationships between agency, oppression, and responsibility, the 'Structural Responsibility' framework differs greatly from the Excuses framework. While the latter reacts to oppression by suggesting an alternative view of victim agency, the former develops an alternative type of responsibility for which victim agency in its influenced state can be included. This alternative responsibility is explicitly structural, de-emphasising individual agency and de-coupling responsibility from blameworthiness, in direct contrast with conventional models of responsibility. The result is an acceptance of the Functioning Agency Claim, affirmed through the ascription of responsibilities to resist across all agents, and the accommodation of the Transformative Oppression claim through lessening the blameworthiness associated with the responsibility itself. This is ultimately an attempt to bite the bullet on avoiding blameworthiness for failures to resist while rejecting the implication that doing so sanctions oppressive harms.

As briefly explored in §1.1 Young depicts oppression as structural in nature. Injustices are structural rather than interpersonal when, rather than resulting from isolatable acts by individuals or groups of agents, they are created by interlocking factors that combine into a web of "social-structural processes" (2011, 53). The result is a wide set of acts, social norms, and laws none of which can be identified as the individual cause of the injustice.

Young (Ibid, 43–44) uses the following example of housing deprivation to illustrate the process of factors coming together to form unjust processes. Despite acting rationally, 'Sandy' faces the prospect of homelessness. She originally moves out due to the threat of eviction by a new developer who has bought the building she lives in. Her choice of

apartments is largely constrained by her job location, income, housing subsidy wait times, finding a safe neighbourhood for her children, and the looming eviction date. When she finally finds a potential (though unideal) apartment, she is told by the rental agent that the rental policy demands an initial deposit to reserve the apartment. Sandy cannot afford this and thus cannot rent the apartment.

Despite her 'choices', Sandy's housing deprivation is largely a result of external conditions and other agents' decisions - both being beyond her control. While it is of course possible that the agents involved could have acted immorally, Young's example explicitly imagines this to not be the case. Sandy's landlord may have sold the building to prioritise the quality of maintenance in their other properties in the face of financial straits. The employees of the new developer that actioned the purchase likely lack control over the deal's details and may depend on their job to support their families. The rental agent has no power over the policy and may have treated Sandy respectfully at every turn (Ibid, 46). It is difficult then to identify who exactly is responsible for Sandy's housing deprivation.

Perhaps the answer is in the surrounding laws and norms. An endless list of factors are at play here: property laws do not protect Sandy when her landlord sells the building, tenancy policies further the interests of property managers and landlords, municipal zoning laws and investment policies create incentives for developers to treat property as an investment rather than a basic need. This is compounded by a sex-segregated and spatially mismatched labour market that disproportionately disadvantages women like Sandy without college and technical training (Ibid, 45–49).

While these external conditions evidently influence Sandy's situation, to hold what amounts to the very financial state of society responsible for Sandy's housing deprivation is not a convincing stance. First, it is unclear how 'society', a body with no singular agency, can be a target of responsibility. How should individuals within society relate to this responsibility, and if they are given derivative responsibilities, are we not back to square one with no individual factor feasibly singled out as the predominant cause of injustice? This approach does not reflect the "multiple, large scale, and relatively long term" (Ibid, 47) factors that collectively reinforce the status hierarchies of housing deprivation (Ibid,

55). While something is clearly wrong with individuals being pushed towards homelessness through no fault of their own, we cannot easily identify the respective wrong*doer(s)* responsible.

This approach of identifying the 'wrongdoers' of injustice as grounds for establishing responsibilities to resist is identified by Young as conventional 'Liability Models of Responsibility'. These models assign responsibility to specific agents based on voluntary actions "causally connected to the circumstances for which responsibility is sought" (Ibid, 97). The goal is to single out "particular agents as *the* liable ones" (Ibid, 98), then attribute labels of guilt, fault, etc. and provide legitimate grounds for sanction or compensation (Zheng 2018, 872). On the liability model, being responsible for an injustice means being blameworthy for it.

Young argues against over-utilising the liability model in structural circumstances for the following reasons. First, the web of contributing factors creates structural injustices only in virtue of their collective interactions. Therefore, no individual agent, act or event (including clearly immoral or illegal actions) can be "causally disentangled from the structural processes" (Young 2011, 100) and analysed separately as the liability model seeks to do. Second, concepts key to individual agency including harmful intent and voluntary choice often do not factor into the mundane and often well-intentioned behaviour of most agents involved in structural problems. Third, the liability model is predominantly backwards-looking, centring responsibility around a *past* event. On this view, discussions of the present largely derive both their importance and content from the past Ibid, 108). For example, the present activity of determining appropriate retribution is conceptualised in terms of what past event they are retributive *for*. For Young, this backwards-looking approach interferes with forwards-looking goals, in particular, that of constructing future just societies.

Insofar as we accept the difficulty of tying present responsibilities for structural injustices to identifiable past causes, insisting on doing so limits the pool of responsible agents to an ambiguous set of 'liable' agents while absolving the much larger set of 'non-liable' agents. Certainly, some 'liable' agents appear to act immorally within unjust societies,

maliciously harming others or wilfully benefitting from others' disadvantage (Ibid, 95). Recall, however, that 'non-liable' agents also perpetuate oppression through passive participation. If we accept that structural change requires collective action from all those involved, responsibilities to resist from non-liable parties will be necessary to overcome oppression (Barry and Ferracioli 2013, 250). Thus, our concepts of liability struggle to do the work needed to effectively discuss structural injustice's causes and solutions.

Note that Young is not claiming that individual responsibility does not exist, rather, that properly understanding an agent's circumstances involves referring "*both* to the structural constraints and opportunities he or she faces, *and* to his or her choices and actions in relation to them" (Young 2011, 26). However, insofar as structural injustices are created and maintained by ongoing processes made up of numerous interconnecting factors, it makes sense that liability models focused on designating certain groups as guilty and not guilty will struggle in understanding how best to discharge responsibilities for structural injustice (Zheng 2018, 872).

Young acknowledges that one could attempt to extend liability models of responsibility to better fit structural injustice (2011, 100). Perhaps one could conceptualise structural injustice in terms of individual agents being responsible for one segment of a collective wrong. However, from the get-go, this segmented approach obscures the overlapping and dynamic nature of how social-structural processes create injustice. While there are likely other methods of amending liability models in this way, I believe that fundamentally, stretching a liability model to fit structural injustice mispresents the differences between structural and interpersonal injustice as merely quantitative when, they are in fact distinct (Ibid, 101–4). The most plausible amended liability models will likely remain unsatisfying and awkward in their haphazard attempts to capture inherently structural elements of oppression.

The insufficiency of conventional liability models prompts Young to posit the 'Social Connection Model' ('SCM') as a "different conception of responsibility altogether" (Ibid, 104). Under SCM, agents have a qualitatively distinct *structural* responsibility for resisting structural injustice in virtue of contributing to the social-structural processes producing

these unjust outcomes (Ibid, 105). However, this 'contribution' differs from the direct causal link discussed by liability models; rather, it involves reproducing the background conditions of structures (McKeown 2018, 484). Presenting our contributions to injustice in this way presents a more passive and indirect relationship between agent and injustice that ultimately makes it easier to realistically attribute contributions to injustice to individual agents.

Simply existing within an unjust society pulls us into reproducing these unjust processes - our surrounding structures shape our agency, forming the conditions within which we create, frame and pursue our aims (Ibid, 497). Even without malicious intent then, our everyday actions involve simultaneously assuming, and reproducing these structures and the roles, relations and resulting injustices within them (Giddens 1979 as cited in Young 2011, 60; Gunnemyr 2020, 569). For example, while we do not create the conditions that cause Sandy's housing deprivation, we reproduce them by occupying societal roles (renter, landlord, property agent etc.) that embody and perpetuate these unjust conditions i.e. by signing leases that reinforce exploitative conditions on renters.

A second novel feature of structural responsibility is that although it is grounded by contribution to structural injustice, it is not directed towards correcting our wrongdoing but instead towards wider structural change. In Young's words, it asks us to take on a shared "obligation to join with others [...] to transform the structural processes to make their outcomes less unjust" (Young 2011, 96). This forwards-looking approach contrasts with the backwards-looking liability model. While SCM considers past events, it does so only insofar as this facilitates forwards-looking structural transformation (i.e. understanding the context of our actions), rather than conceptualising current and future acts in terms of past events. This, in turn, informs the actions that structural responsibility gives rise to, favouring in particular, collective and ongoing action such as organising into community groups or lobbying for long-term policy improvements.

Crucially, divorcing structural responsibility from wrongdoing renders it non-isolating and non-blameworthy. As responsibility is distributed across all contributing agents rather than only the predominant cause of the injustice, no specific agent is isolated as

solely burdened with the responsibility to resist. Framing responsibility not as compensation for a past event but rather as a commitment to a future change also removes any necessary associations of blameworthiness from ascriptions of responsibility (Zheng 2018, 872).

This approach expands both the scope "of subjects that can be considered responsible [and the] scope of possible objects of moral responsibility" (Zheng 2018, 872). We are dissuaded from conceptualising resistance as a finite set of acts to neatly compensate for discrete past events after which the responsibility can be considered complete (McKeown 2018, 493). Rather, because structural injustice is caused by the interactions between contributing factors, our responsibility to resist moves us to transform these structures more widely rather than merely tackling our individual contributions. This presents both structural injustice and the resulting responsibilities for it as ongoing (Young 2011, 109). This enlarged scope ultimately encourages necessary collaboration from a wider set of agents, presenting both structural injustice and its resulting responsibilities as ongoing all while identifying less obvious and less individualistic contributing factors to injustice. Taken together, this approach lessens the likelihood that we neglect vital avenues in pursuing structural change.

Although we all share structural responsibility, we do not do so equally. Rather, the burdens of resistance (what and how much we should do) are allocated in virtue of our position within unjust social-structural processes (Young 2011, 181; Gunnemyr 2020, 568). Young posits four axes that inform this: power, privilege, interest, and collective ability (Young 2011, 144–46).

First, different social positions carry different degrees of *power* over their surrounding structures. For example, companies and governments hold much more influence than the average individual. Second, *privilege* - which often overlaps with power - describes positions that are benefitted (materially, socially, etc.) by these structures. These benefits reduce the constraints privileged agents experience when trying to act, including acting to enact change. Third, the axis of *interest* describes agents whose personal goals coincide with structural transformation. Lastly, *collective ability* reflects a close proximity to

organised groups (such as unions and church groups), that facilitate mobilisation as a resource for collective influence.

Each agent occupies a particular social position along these four axes, enabling or disabling them in various ways to shape their capacity for resistance. These axes allow us to identify the content and degree of burden appropriate to our ability to discharge our responsibility to resist. While victims of oppression likely hold disadvantages in power and privilege, they may also be disproportionately invested in change and possess access to relevant community groups. Analysing our responsibilities to resist through these axes guides us on how to establish the burdens of resistance without tying this to past wrongdoing. This incorporates more nuance into how victims as individuals are both enabled and disabled by society and the impact this has on their capacities for resistance.

In sum, the features of structural responsibility discussed largely facilitate the application of responsibilities of resistance to structural injustice. Separating responsibility from claims of fault over the injustice's existence and directing it instead towards pragmatic structural change represents a stark contrast to what the ascription of responsibility *means* for agents. By ascribing structural responsibility to all those who contribute to unjust processes (Young 2011, 113), and including victims within this, SCM acknowledges victim agency. At the same time, removing the implications of blameworthiness and determining the burdens of responsibility based on what agents have the capacity for (including how oppression has transformed this) severely lessens the concern of overly-burdensome responsibilities. In this way, SCM's positing of structural responsibility and its focus on what we can collectively do going forward to transform unjust structures appears to accommodate and balance both key claims, offering a meaningful conceptualisation of victim responsibilities to resist without victim blaming.

In the following sections, I will examine two related objections to using SCM's structural responsibility as a framework to avoid Victim Blaming. The first objection is that in cutting out blame, SCM ends up with a temporally incoherent model of responsibility. The second objection is that even if SCM can cohesively divorce responsibility from blame, doing so risks losing aspects of responsibility vital to how we want to conceptualise

responsibilities to resist oppression. Both objections imply that SCM's conceptual framework for de-coupling blame from responsibility is insufficient, it cannot accommodate the Transformative Oppression claim, and thus it falls prey to victim blaming. Note that in limiting my focus to SCM and its offshoots, I accept that there may be structural models of responsibility unexplored here that better overcome these obstacles. However, as these obstacles pose risks for structural responsibility frameworks more generally, of which I consider Young's theory to be a foundational example, I will tentatively treat my analysis of SCM as indicative of structural responsibility more widely.

3.2 Objection 1 – SCM Fails to Escape Blame

Beginning with our first objection, Young argues that responsibility for resisting oppression does not imply blameworthiness for its creation. However, creating injustice is one of several entry points for blame, another is the blameworthiness agents get in retrospect if they fail to fulfil a responsibility. Nussbaum argues that in presenting responsibility as a *prospective* concept (applying to ongoing and future events), Young neglects to clarify how to understand it retrospectively once it is already ascribed.

Say "at time t, agent A bears responsibility R for social ill S" (Nussbaum 2011, xxi) and A does not act on this responsibility. At t+1, while A may retain a responsibility for S going forward (for t+2 and so on), it seems odd to completely ignore the failure to fulfil R at t. Ignoring these failures as a principle such that failing to resist at t+1 is ignored at t+2 and so on, essentially lets agents off the hook entirely. The result is that "no task they have failed to shoulder ever goes onto the debit or guilt side of their ledger, and the new task always lies ahead of them" (Ibid.). Yet, this is counterintuitive to both common understanding and Young's usage of 'ought' as indicating something we are *compelled* to do.

This phenomenon of time passing renders Young's attempt to distinguish backwards-looking blame and forwards-looking responsibility implausible. SCM appears to claim both that agents have a responsibility to alleviate structural injustice *and* that upon failing

to do so, we need not re-evaluate their relationship with this responsibility at all (Nussbaum 2011, xxi; Barry and Ferracioli 2013, 225; Beck 2020, 9). The temporal involvement here is further muddied given the interconnected nature of contributors to structural injustice, as each failure to resist is not merely an isolated act but rather reproduces the structures that create current and future injustices. Even if SCM avoids blaming victims for the creation of structural injustices, this second entry point of blame must also be addressed. Thus, it seems SCM must either re-introduce a retrospective response to cover the consequence of a failed responsibility or face temporal inconsistency over an ever-forwards-looking responsibility.

Without further development, the former option of reincorporating a retrospective response is unpalatable. It threatens to modify SCM much closer towards the liability model, losing its distinction and novel value (Barry and Ferracioli 2013, 256). Perhaps instead, one can argue that responsibilities are life-time commitments and therefore not fit for evaluation in narrow temporal chunks. We may have contributed to structural transformation throughout our life even if, at time t, we failed to resist. This suggests that having a responsibility may not involve always acting on it or acting in a specific prescribed way. However, I do not believe this resolves the issue either, instead merely pushing back the judgment of blame. Even if we cannot evaluate an agent's actions at t once reaching t+1, we could still wait for a larger chunk of time to pass, say, the agent's life, to judge whether the agent has fulfilled their responsibilities. Here, the concern of blameworthiness following the completion or failure of the responsibility reappears.

Young's answer is difficult to interpret. She claims both that "we should not be blamed or found at fault for what we do to try to rectify injustice, even if we do not succeed" (2011, 143), but also that we "can and should be criticised for not taking action, not taking enough action, taking ineffective action, or taking action that is counterproductive" (Ibid.). As it stands, without a means to juggle both claims and plausibly conceptualise structural responsibility across time, SCM will struggle to deny this additional entry point of blame.

3.3 Objection 2 – Blame's Value within Responsibility

A second objection to SCM's structural responsibility is to argue that it suffers from its choice to separate blameworthiness from responsibility. Backwards-looking concepts like blame carry various useful implications: recognising the wrongdoer's agency and the harm they have contributed to, as well as emphasising a certain relationship between wrongdoer and wronged that can then ground apologies, retribution and so on. If blame offers vital analytical tools for understanding responsibility, then removing them risks sacrificing various explanatory benefits (L. Wilson 2021, 253).

Before we continue, note that the value we commonly associate with blameworthiness may actually be derived from moral reproach more generally. I use moral reproach as an umbrella term for the range of responses involving (1) theoretical elements of evaluation associated with moral failure, and (2) affective elements i.e., emotional expressions of disapproval. These responses vary in strength and are appropriate depending on what kind of moral situation has occurred. While blameworthiness is a quintessential example, others include conventional criticism, rebuke, disapproval, and so on. Thus, while the benefits associated with blame *may* indicate the advantages of incorporating it into a model of responsibility, we should avoid outright assuming that blameworthiness (rather than some other form of moral reproach) is necessary for these associated benefits.

Let us explore in turn, two sources of value that moral reproach can provide to a theory of responsibility: (1) Practical value as a "tool for effecting social change" (Calhoun 1989, 389), and (2) value as a morally or emotionally apt response to one's victimisation.

Moral reproach offers various forms of practical value. First, while agents morally develop through theoretical understanding, they also learn through practical experience. Adding affective elements to these moral experiences can engage our empathy to provide another level on which agents internalise moral principles (Ibid, 405). For example, if failing to fulfil a responsibility is met with anger while fulfilling it grants approval, agents may intuitively appreciate the content and importance of this responsibility, suggesting an educational benefit to moral reproach.

Secondly, the stigmas associated with moral reproach contribute to a hierarchical dynamic between the wrongdoer and wronged that can itself have conceptual benefits. In Chapter 1, I touched on how, when too severe, the stigma of wrongdoing results in problematic victim blaming. However, in measured amounts, reproachful concepts (for example, 'guilty', 'oppressor', 'sexist') that draw on this hierarchy can be used as a tool to mark out particularly harmful actions and how they have damaged or altered the moral and social relationship between the wronged and wrongdoer.

In cases where the relationship is abandoned, our use of reproachful concepts reinforces our commitment to the principles of our moral community i.e. that the acts committed are wrong and warrant the breakdown of the moral relationship. On the other hand, setting this hierarchical dynamic opens the door to a set of steps towards the relationship's repair, including redemptive action and forgiveness to raise the wrongdoer back to their original moral/social position and resolve the wrongdoing (Scanlon 2008 as cited in Dover 2019, 33; Zheng 2021, 506).

A third source of practical value is the motivational benefit that accompanies the risk of sanction by moral reproach. Without sanctions, some who can fulfil their responsibilities may nevertheless neglect them if they know they will be absolved regardless. This renders the ascription of responsibility toothless (Barry and Ferracioli 2013, 255). Instead, being targets of reproach recognises and holds to account our identity as moral agents, confirmation of our capacity to "be further educated, or motivated, or made more alive to [our] agency" (Ibid.). This motivational push may even be empowering, moving both agents on the receiving end of reproach and bystanders hoping to avoid sanctioning themselves to reflect on their own agency (Dover 2019, 33).

In addition to moral reproach's practical value, it may also simply be an *appropriate* response to structural injustice. We can look to Amia Srinivasan's (2018) argument on anger as an apt response to injustice before applying similar reasoning to moral reproach. Srinivasan suggests that regardless of whether anger is counterproductive to social progress (this, she stresses, remains an open empirical question), there can also be intrinsic value in it being a justified response to genuine moral violation (Ibid, 6–7). On a

different level to merely *knowing* that injustice exists, anger can be a "means of *affectively registering or appreciating* [emphasis added] the injustice of the world" (Ibid, 10). Srinivasan compares this to our capacity for aesthetic appreciation. The value in knowing something has beauty is distinct from appreciating it through being emotionally affected by it. It may be a valuable facet of one's moral character then to not only theoretically understand moral principles but be moved by them. To expend some degree of time and emotional energy in the face of moral wrongdoing is then a way of expressing one's understanding that something morally valuable has been lost.

Srinivasan adds that where anger *is* counterproductive, victims of injustice are made victims twice over - the costly normative conflict of choosing between apt anger and prudential action is itself a second-order 'affective injustice' (2018, 5). She presents affective injustice as a psychic tax of sorts, unfairly limiting the valid emotional responses for some agents - victims - but not others.

In addition to this, by categorically prioritising potential practical disadvantages of anger over its potential aptness, we present moral violations as "a practical problem to be solved, rather than a wrongdoing to which its victim must bear witness" (Ibid, 11). Thus, deprioritising justified anger risks obscuring the fact that duties to fix unjust circumstances are placed on victims *only because* the perpetrators continue their actions. This treats moral violations "as a fixed fact, rather than a contingency" (Ibid.) that itself requires altering.

If we accept that anger is a plausibly apt response to injustice, it seems reasonable that the same can be true for moral reproach. For starters, anger towards injustice can itself be considered an affective form of moral reproach. Srinivasan describes apt anger as involving a moral violation specifically providing a *reason* for anger - in this case, anger expresses an affective evaluation of moral violation, in other words, moral reproach. In accepting the existence of apt anger then, we have already accepted one form of apt moral reproach.

From here, it is not much of a leap to argue that moral reproach more widely may be a means of properly recognising the wrongdoings that have occurred and thus that it similarly holds value in aptness. Even if we don't view apt anger directly as a form of moral reproach, given that it involves judging an act to be a genuine moral violation with a moral wrongdoer one is angry *at*, understanding apt anger will inevitably draw on moral reproach anyways. Because Srinivasan's analysis builds directly on concepts of moral reproach, as it stands we cannot understand apt anger without accepting moral reproach as a necessary element granting it instrumental value at the very least.

While the value of aptness is plausible, one might respond by claiming moral reproach's irrelevance to analysing oppression specifically as a *structural* injustice. As mentioned, Young does not deny that individual wrongdoing occurs within the context of structural injustice, merely that these are not covered within structural responsibility. Perhaps, while claims of aptness are perfectly appropriate in these individual cases, they are ill-applied to structural injustice as a whole. If we allow for this separation, then in the case of oppression more widely, it may be that no individualised wrongdoing can be identified for moral reproach or anger to be an apt response *to*. Assuming this to be true, this kind of aptness may simply not apply to structural responsibility and thus not need to be accounted for.

A major obstacle to this response is that Srinivasan explicitly explores the aptness of anger within the context of structural injustice. She highlights our capacity to get angry not only at individuals but also at structural injustices themselves taking misogyny, racism and wealth inequality as examples (2016). Though her phrasing naturally shifts when discussing the capacity for anger to its aptness from discussions of structures to the individual, taken at face value, Srinivasan maintains that even through a structural lens, anger (and in our case, moral reproach) at those who contribute to oppression can be apt. This suggests a structural analysis of oppression is compatible with justified affective responses, including apt moral reproach.

Could someone go a step further and argue that the structural nature of oppression renders discussions of oppressive *wrongdoings* meaningless? If contrary to Young's

claims, wrongdoing does not factor into structural injustice at all, then there will be little practical or apt value to moral reproach. Yet, even though SCM persuasively presents oppression as a largely structural process, it is exceedingly difficult to deny that many acts within oppression seem fitting of the label of 'wrongdoing'. When the misogynist sexually harasses a co-worker, the injustice of their action may only be fully understood in the context of sexist society as a whole. At the same time, however, it seems perfectly reasonable to also examine the act interpersonally. On this smaller interpersonal scale, the concepts of wrongdoing and moral reproach regain importance in manoeuvring the relationship between the two agents, escalating and resolving the moral issue in ways that are meaningful to the parties involved and the communities around them. In reality, it seems plausible to argue that the misogynist has both contributed to an unjust process *and* wronged this particular victim of oppression.

To emphasise this point, we can consider an alternative version of Young's housing deprivation example where the agents involved go out of their way to wrong Sandy. The letting agent is dismissive and rude, knowing that Sandy is reliant on them and not in a position to complain. The landlord takes financial advantage of tenants or refuses to rent to certain groups. The developers lobby and bribe politicians to neglect the need for affordable housing. In these cases, even if a structural analysis of oppression is needed to get a whole picture of the situation, disregarding the existence of wrongdoing and justified moral reproach is too hasty.

Despite certain advantages of moving away from the liability model's fixation on blame, doing so risks losing out on both practical (i.e. educational, conceptual, and motivational) benefits of moral reproach as well as its value in recognising and appropriately responding to wrongdoing. In response, it would be extremely demanding for SCM to outright argue that oppression-based wrongdoing does not occur, a claim that I do not believe Young intends. If we accept the existence of oppressive wrongdoing and seek the value moral reproach brings in analysing this, we may need to conceptualise structural responsibility to accommodate concepts like blame to maintain its viability.

3.4 Blame Versus Moral Criticism

Given that fully incorporating blameworthiness into structural responsibility would represent a significant digression from Young's structuralist principles, proponents of structural responsibility might seek to dismiss the aforementioned value of blameworthiness in favour of other forms of moral reproach. This can be attempted through two arguments that reinforce each other. The first (explored in §3.4.1) is to push back on the claim that blame is necessary within our particular domain of victim responsibilities to resist oppression. The second (explored in §3.4.2), is to introduce an alternative concept - moral criticism - that can fill a similar role to blame with its benefits of temporal consistency and theoretical value (aptness, motivation, etc.) while avoiding its problematic implications.

I will examine each argument in turn, concluding that they effectively call into question the position of blame as paramount in pursuing structural change, and offer a viable alternative in the form of moral criticism. Crucially, this enables a *reduced reliance* on blameworthiness to respond effectively to moral concerns – a substantial change in how we conceptualise responsibilities of resistance. The limitation here, however, is that these arguments cannot convincingly deny the value blame maintains as a tool for tackling oppression and the interpersonal wrongdoings within it. While the path forwards appears to be a kind of hybrid approach of the two, this is at the detriment of the structural responsibility framework, as much of the explanatory work regarding victim blameworthiness will be left unexplored by it.

3.4.1 Questioning Blame's Necessity

The question of whether blame is necessary for victim responsibilities to resist oppression can be better understood by first considering what the central goal of this responsibility *is* –what fulfilled and unfulfilled responsibility should look like and in turn, what concepts work in service of understanding and conveying this.

To start, one can reasonably answer that the central goal of the responsibility to resist oppression is oppression's removal. This itself, however, can be interpreted and thus pursued in a variety of ways. Blocking or lessening individual cases of oppression and rebuilding moral relations within society (Harvey 2010, 22) can indeed go hand in hand. By removing contributing factors and relieving some of oppression's effects (i.e. by dissuading individuals from committing oppressive harms) perhaps we work to destabilise the oppressive structures that undermine just moral relations. On this assumption, we could argue that blameworthiness is well suited to the goals of resistance, offering a means of holding those who commit oppressive harms to account, challenging oppressive power and disincentivising contributing to oppression.

On the other hand, we could interpret the goal of removing oppression as best served not by these piecemeal interventions, but rather by focusing on rebuilding moral relations themselves. Arguably, the pursuit of the two approaches can also conflict, including where one relieves oppressive circumstances in the short term by leveraging structures that nevertheless perpetuate oppression more generally. Moreover, when we consider the dynamic nature of structural injustice, removing one contributing factor likely prompts another to quickly step into its place.

To help with this interpretive choice, let us consider other structural contexts and their resulting responsibilities for comparison. Take, for example, the domain of healthcare, which plausibly holds the central goal of improving and protecting the health of those in the community. We may take on responsibilities to ourselves and each other to foster this health, and we may expect the state and healthcare workers to fulfil responsibilities to facilitate this. Nevertheless, it is often counterintuitive for key policy decisions i.e. determining whether someone should receive care, to focus on whether individuals have failed their responsibilities towards themselves, and thus are blameworthy for their condition.

Even when this is the case, it is ineffective for the goal of improving public health, for an agent's blameworthiness to justify withholding benefits to their health. For one, individuals who contribute to their own pain, immobility, and the shortening of their own

lives, already suffer for their contributions, putting into question the value of withholding benefits as 'punishment' for the blameworthy (J. Wilson 2021, 179). This self-inflicted suffering also already provides a strong intrinsic incentive to change – as these individuals have not done so however, this suggests that using blameworthiness to hold them "accountable for their failure to protect their own health would [not] provide an effective additional incentive" (Ibid, 180). With this in mind, constructing our healthcare policy around questions of responsibility and blameworthiness for not adhering to principles of good health would neither be helpful for patients nor would it "allow healthcare professionals to do their job more effectively" (Ibid, 182).

Granted, circumstances where one must allocate insufficient resources may present an exception to this. In this case, we must prioritise patients through a variety of methods, including perhaps, whether they caused, or are likely to continue causing their conditions. Here, it appears justified to make judgements on access to healthcare dependent on whether the individual has fulfilled their responsibilities, an approach in which blameworthiness may become relevant again. However, this method of prioritisation is contentious itself, and its value when considering circumstances with insufficient resources should not be considered indicative of justifying its wider use. Instead, the need to prioritise in these suboptimal cases is better understood as a temporary and crucially tragic practical measure that acts as a short-term solution rather than furthering the central goal of benefitting public health.

Assuming we view oppression similarly as a structural problem, the same argument can be made here. For both oppression and poor public health, depicting the problem as "the result of a system operating with a chronic pattern of small errors or omissions" (Munro 2005, 534 as cited in Wilson 2021, 167) rather than focusing on singular mistakes provides a more accurate and helpful view of the problem. This in turn informs our solutions – to remove and prevent structural injustice, our best bet is to *systematically* reduce the factors (and their interactions) that cause them, rather than pursue individualised blame for these factors. Focusing on blame oversimplifies the situation and obfuscates these solutions.

It may still be true incorporating blameworthiness can sometimes benefit attempts to systematically reduce oppressive factors – take for example, legal proceedings where creating negative incentives and enforcing retributive action can work to enforce rules of justice on a medium-scale. However, because the structural nature of oppression calls into question the necessity of blame in solving the problem, we can accept the value blame *can* provide, while nevertheless arguing that this is outweighed on the whole by the benefits of tackling these structures systematically. Therefore, a blameless model of responsibility may still be viable, and even preferable in achieving structural change.

This weighing up of the benefits of blame versus non-blame is further supported when we examine cases involving individual wrongs where blame remains conceptually unhelpful. The act of singling out certain liable parties from non-liable ones to determine blameworthiness becomes practically meaningless when applied to entire societies, all of whom are contributing factors to oppression.

Conceptually breaking down society into smaller historically salient ones does not sufficiently help to identify distinctly liable individuals. Judging, for example, 'men' as a group as liable for sexism involves conceiving of an implausibly large amount of individuals over time as a single collective agent. Even if we reduce this group to currently existing men, it would be unconvincing to blame them for the creation of sexist structures given that many of its causes have existed and compounded over time before any of these men were born (Young 2011, 77). Considering that change requires distinctively *collective* action, the very act of distinguishing between liable and non-liable agents muddies the need for *all* agents to play their part by overly inflating the abilities of liable individuals while letting the non-liable off the hook for contributing to structural change. This in turn severely undermines the very possibility of transformative change.

Allowing that individual wrongdoing occurs within oppression, blame is often still motivationally counterproductive to collective action and progress. Associating responsibility with blame prompts discussions of responsibility to produce defensiveness and, in turn, mistrust and resentment Ibid, 114). There is, after all, an accusatory slant to identifying and judging blameworthy parties. If we suspect someone as blameworthy for

our own victimhood, we are likely to view them as morally compromised and avoid cooperation with them. Even where this blame is well-deserved, it can encourage feelings of entitlement and a fixation on punishing the wrongdoer, further undermining the possibility of productive moral dialogue and reinforcing pre-existing identities of oppressor and victim (Zheng 2021, 516). When we then find that we cannot satisfyingly match the blameworthy party to the docket of wrongs that exist, our mistrust and resentment may turn towards society en masse.

If on the other hand, we are the target of discussions surrounding responsibility for resistance, we will likely become guarded or resentful of the implication of blameworthiness. Young describes the phenomena of 'blame-switching' – defending oneself by "throwing blame on to another" (Young 2011, 117) - as a common reaction to perceived accusations of blameworthiness. This is particularly tempting considering that as a structural problem, other agents will indeed be contributing to oppression. However, this process of blame-switching will continue indefinitely, never providing a conclusive group of blameworthy individuals for whom demands for reparations and punishment are appropriate. In this way, associating responsibility with blameworthiness risks re-framing responsibilities to resist not as neutral tasks we *all* choose to take up but rather as a judgement of moral failure. This is antithetical to structural change for which a spirit of cooperation and a willingness to enter into a better society together are necessary. At worst, this paralyses our ability to develop and implement solutions to oppression.

To restate, the takeaway is not that blame is counterproductive across responsibility more widely. Many of blame's implications appear appropriate in more isolated cases of moral wrongdoing that lend themselves to a hierarchical and finite problem and solution (Young 2011, 117). In these cases, looking inwards on our past actions, evaluating how our actions have fallen afoul of moral principles and recompensating those we have wronged is how a transgressor is *meant* to respond to judgements of blameworthiness. To be blamed invokes a decrease in moral standing, itself a form of social retribution for the wrongdoer. Thus, an agent can re-commit to the moral principles held by the community by undergoing compensation for one's wrongdoing whether through an "acceptance of rebuke, with evidence of remorse or shame [or by offering an] apology or

amends" (Walker 2006, 135 as cited in Dover 2019, 38). This almost call-and-response routine (McKenna 2012 as cited in Dover 2019, 39) uses blame to motivate the steps of moral growth and the resolution of wrongdoing that then facilitates the agent's re-integration into the moral community.

Yet, in the context of structural problems, expecting neatly tied together wrongdoings, punishments and resolutions conflicts with the complicated webs of contributing factors and similarly structural solutions. Our goals of structural change seem better served by targeting the wider structural relations that require changing rather than by focusing our attention on resolving individual acts of wrongdoing (Ibid, 118). It is on these grounds that blameworthiness, while useful in other moral issues, may be less valuable as a tool for conceptualising and motivating effective resistance against oppression.

3.4.2 Moral Criticism as an Alternative

Young suggests that instead of blame, we "should be *criticised* [emphasis added] for not taking action, not taking enough action, taking ineffective action, or taking action that is counterproductive" (2011, 143). Unlike blame, this 'moral criticism' (Dover 2019; Zheng 2021) is founded not on motivating the identification and retribution of past wrongs but rather on encouraging solidarity between those who recognise a shared responsibility towards the social institutions they uphold (Young 2011, 121). Moral criticism then, is presented as a way to hold ourselves and others to account for distinctly *structural* responsibilities, fulfilling the temporal and practical role we associate with blame without appealing to it directly (Ibid, 118, 165). While Young does not develop the concept of moral criticism much further, it is built upon by others seeking blame alternatives. Let us first consider these conceptualisations before considering how moral criticism contrasts with blame, and how it fits victim responsibilities of resistance.

To start, we must tackle the preliminary objection that moral criticism is merely "a communicative response to wrongdoing that is more or less continuous with blame" (Dover 2019, 26), and thus not a genuine alternative. If this is the case, it will likely suffer

the same issues rendering the argument a non-starter. This, however, is a misinterpretation of Young – a distinction must be made between the pre-existing conception of 'reactive criticism' we typically use as pseudo-blame, and the concept of interest here, this being a distinctly open-ended 'interactive criticism' (Ibid.).

To appreciate this difference between blame and moral criticism, it is helpful to view the distinction as that of a summative and formative moral response (Zheng 2021)[4]. Zheng argues that the two types of moral response each correspond to a mode of morality, with the two modes oriented around entirely different goal sets (Ibid, 505). Summative responses lend themselves to imperatival morality, which is largely concerned with judging how we exercise agency, setting hard constraints on behaviour and providing punishments when we break these constraints. Formative responses on the other hand better fit aspirational morality which seeks to improve agency *towards* moral ideals, often focusing on larger overarching moral goals such as being virtuous, bringing about the kingdom of ends or, in our case, creating a just society.

These distinctions of summative/formative responses and imperatival/aspirational modes are already commonplace in non-moral domains. Take, for example, how we evaluate our work. Summative evaluations i.e. end of term essays or exams set a standard for us to attain, serving the "purposes of certification, future placement, or sanctions" (Zheng 2021, 511). The level of feedback needed here can be more or less achieved by stating whether or not work has fallen below standard and is thus unsatisfactory. While guidance on future improvements might be offered, it is by no means the primary purpose of summative evaluations.

Meanwhile, formative evaluations typically occur as checkpoints within an ongoing constructive process at times leading up to future summative evaluation. Here, the primary goal is to improve one's performance (Ibid.) and as such, the standard by which we evaluate work is less likely to be tied to a threshold or compared to others but rather

[4] While this summative/formative distinction is taken from Zheng, her terminology differs, using 'moral criticism' as a catch-all term covering both summative and formative responses. Nevertheless, she draws the same parallels between 'summative criticism' and blame, compared to 'formative criticism' and both Youngian criticism and Dover's interactive criticism.

structured around what most helps the individual's development (Ibid, 512). The level of feedback expected is different too - a simple statement of inadequacy would not serve this purpose. Instead, we may suggest amendments or alternatives that assist the individual in improving their work, and while this act *implies* falling short of a standard, this is by no means the focus of the exercise (Gunnemyr 2020, 579).

We can briefly consider whether aspirational morality can be reduced to imperatival morality and by extension, reduce summative responses to formative responses. These arguments typically attempt to convert moral ideals indicative of aspirational morality into specific duties with clearer pass/fail conditions, for example, fulfilling *our particular share* of a larger obligation (Kolers 2016 as cited in Zheng 2021, 524). Instead of demanding the actual achievement of transforming unjust structures, to fulfil our responsibility we merely have to address injustice on a piecemeal basis when we come across it. If this new duty of fulfilling our share is achievable, then blame can be used more effectively to manage it, reducing the need for formative responses (Zheng 2021, 524).

However, these reductive approaches rarely get off the ground. In this case, the sheer demandingness of moral ideals means that "even if we confine ourselves to occasions in which collective action has drawn bright imperatival lines in the sand, very few of us can go through life without crossing one or more of them" (Ibid.). While some agents facing inevitable failure might still be palatable (some agents are simply blameworthy), realistically the *majority* of agents will find it impossible to consistently fulfil even piecemeal responsibilities. On the other hand, watering down the responsibility too far would again risk undermining our attempts towards structural change even when considering the acts collectively. Facing this, instead of wrestling aspirational ideals into imperatival duties, it is more intuitive and conceptually clearer to simply take seriously the existence of distinct formative responses (Ibid, 508).

With this out of the way, conceiving of moral criticism as a kind of formative *moral* response offers insight into its application, and why it justifies being a concept distinct from blame. Utilising moral criticism as a kind of formative response when we fall short of our responsibilities to resist presents our goal of a just society as an ideal we work

towards despite our "limited, imperfect, and structurally constrained agency" (Zheng 2021, 505). This acknowledges that while we as individuals have a tenuous link to actually achieving this goal, we nevertheless deserve feedback and guidance on how to better work towards it. This includes showing us what we *would* need to better fulfil these responsibilities even where it is beyond our ability to do so at the moment, without highlighting the implication that this inability is a failure on our part. At this point, I believe we are warranted in using 'moral criticism' to refer to this formative moral response, distinct from blame and the conventional understandings of 'criticism', and more akin to a kind of critical inquiry. It will be crucial to keep this in mind as we continue leaning on moral criticism as a vital tool for discussing victim agency within the responsibility to resist.

While taking a formative response to our responsibilities to resist reduces the taboos associated with apparent failure, this does not sacrifice accountability or commitment to our moral ideals. Rather, moral criticism is justified and relevant regardless of "how much we have already devoted towards our ideals, [making] claims on us so long as there is suffering and injustice in the world" (Zheng 2021, 518). No matter our history of resistance or non-resistance, our participation in the ongoing goals of removing oppression stays salient and necessary for future progress (Ibid, 515). This dismisses claims that we have already done enough, that the problem is too large, or that our agency is too diminished – moral criticism always encourages us towards our goals of justice.

Taking a step back to evaluate the differences between this formative approach of moral criticism and the archetypal summative response of blame, we can see that while both are evaluative in nature, they hold substantially different goals with this, in turn, creating meaningfully distinct evaluative structures, contents, and tones. Moral criticism does away with the neat call-and-response routine of judgement and retribution, and even with the assumed hierarchical relationship of wronged and wrongdoer (Dover 2019, 27). The result is an open-ended, recursive and "mutual exchange of criticism" (Ibid, 38) for which all parties are encouraged to contribute. The goal is a "complicated conversation which fundamentally involves moral discovery on the part of [all] parties" (Lacey and Pickard 2021, 268) focused on "scaffolding rather than sanctioning agency" (Zheng 2021, 525).

By not assuming liability to punishment or social judgement, utilising moral criticism positions those involved (and indeed the discussion of responsibilities to resist more generally) not as two individuals for which one is 'the problem' but rather as a collective of people working together to solve a wider problem.

Crucially, these distinguishing features present moral criticism as more collaborative, open-ended, and ultimately, more digestible for the agents involved, taking the accusatory and isolating sting out of discussing an agent's responsibilities of resistance and how they can improve on them. It also widens the group of those who can meaningfully contribute to discussions of responsibility. For some, it is inappropriate to blame another if they lack the standing to blame them, something that can be removed on grounds of hypocrisy, complicity or disingenuousness from the prospective blamer (Lacey and Pickard 2021, 268). This is not the case in moral criticism for which it is appropriate for all parties to voice their criticisms to contribute towards progressing our shared moral ideals (Dover 2019, 44). This places moral criticism in a prime position to accommodate for the forwards-looking and collaborative approach Young argues is necessary to tackle a structural understanding of oppression (Lacey and Pickard 2021, 269).

Despite how naturally we leap to blameworthiness when conceptualising responsibility, I do not believe the same features are true of when we employ blame as our default moral response. This shows not only a genuine distinctiveness in moral criticism both in its content and the view of morality it lends itself to, but also its value as a moral response. It does not matter that resisting oppression is a monumental task, that identifying a punishable moral standard is conceptually difficult, nor that we cannot trace wrongs back to individually blameworthy agents (Zheng 2021, 519–23). Instead, moral criticism is a "communicative vehicle by which we remind or convey to others that they bear the burdens of addressing injustice" (Ibid.).

Why are we so insistent on holding on to the punishment that blame offers? As John Gardner points out, when we fail our moral responsibilities, "some relationships will never be the same; some debts will never be repaid [...] some burdensome actions now have to be undertaken. How does our blameworthiness make it any worse, or even any

different? And if it does not, why blame?" (2021, 83). With moral criticism, we have a means to "hold ourselves and each other responsible" Ibid, 80), overcoming some of the counterproductive elements of blame, while still having a moral response ready for when we fall short of our responsibilities or need guidance towards transforming our unjust societies. As Zheng points out, "however detestable our opponents, they remain members of the world that we need to build [and] who have the potential, as we all do, to act better under a more just scheme of social arrangements" (2021, 529). This is to say, moral criticism is a promising alternative to blame for conceptualising how we should respond to those who do not fulfil their responsibilities of resistance.

3.4.3 Evaluating The Moral Criticism Approach

I believe I have substantially fleshed out both moral criticism's conceptualisation and application as a distinct blame alternative. With charges of underdevelopment out the way, I consider the next strongest objection against moral criticism to be whether its benefits outweigh those of blame. It may be that, similar to blame, while moral criticism is plausible, it is not the most (or only) appropriate form of moral reproach towards failures to resist oppression. Perhaps while the structural nature of oppression lends itself to comparisons with other structural contexts (public health, coordination problems etc.), on a second look, they are meaningfully disanalogous. Thus, even if we accept the use of moral criticism, and that blame is counterproductive in other structural contexts, we may nevertheless maintain blame's value when discussing responsibilities to resist oppression. If this is the case, moral criticism is not sufficient to fulfil our moral response-related needs and the structural responsibility framework must once again contend with its inability to accommodate blame.

One approach to this argument of disanalogy is to argue that there are a wider variety of valid goals associated with resisting oppression, than, our archetypal structural problems, and that these additional goals require blame, and not just moral criticism. For example, one plausible goal of resisting oppression is to remove ingrained injustices or create incentives to comply with justice through systems of policy or criminal law (J. Wilson

2021, 179). Injustice is almost always at least partly pushed along by small groups of powerful and self-interested individuals rather than merely the outcome of hapless accidents. In these cases, a stronger intervention may be necessary to jump-start any real change. Here, blame plays a vital tool as a form of accountability that is not fully covered by our conception of moral criticism. Despite its disadvantages in certain cases, the stigma and punishment threatened by blame can be exactly what we rely on to make agents "more likely [to] act in a way conducive to the policy's success" (Ibid.).

Realistically, the value of blame within supposedly structural concerns appears even within the domain of public health. If a community's poor health is caused by a combination of relatively neutral factors (a natural disaster perhaps) then it is easier to argue that the goal of improving public health is not substantially benefited by accusations of blame. If, however, it is largely caused by a corporation polluting their source of drinking water to cut costs, then tackling the disregard for public health the business has shown seems necessary for sustained improvements to public health, or else the existing incentives will continue this contributing factor indefinitely. In cases like this, public disavowal, punishment, and the direct demand of repayment from a 'guilty' party - all of which stem from a judgement of blame - may be vital in improving public health long term alongside acts focused on restoring the community's water source.

When it comes to power and greed structured along a stagnant hierarchy, bad outcomes from failed responsibilities rarely motivate the agents most able to create change. Without some other incentive, those with power are unlikely to suddenly start caring about their relationships with their communities. Instead, they will continue to benefit from the systematic disadvantage of others, remaining indifferent and inactive in fulfilling their responsibilities of resistance (Kamishima 2019, 151). This is true of the CEO and the shareholders of the polluting cooperation just as it is true of the cooperations, political parties and powerful individuals that continually profit from structural injustice. Without a foundation of mutual respect and moral community, it is unlikely that the kind of open discussion detailed by moral criticism will get a foothold in disassembling the power structures that those in power uphold. Thus, the value of punishment, compensation, and

reproach more generally for pressuring these parties into action cannot be so easily dismissed.

The value of the harsher more accusatory tone of blame can also be seen in the way that stagnant power structures socialise us to normalise and minimise acts of injustice. While moral criticism can encourage critical inquiry, its lighter more collaborative tone may suffer when there is a distinct need to highlight otherwise suppressed facts and re-conceptualise unjust situations.

For example, Zheng points to the narrative of police as 'the good guys' and as protectors of individual and communal safety. Where this narrative is pervasive and reinforced through, surrounding media, we will be less equipped to identify, discuss and resolve rampant police brutality. By contrast, "social movements that condemn police offers as 'killers' and perpetrators of state-sanctioned violence starkly expose vital aspects of the situation that are easily obscured by pernicious ideologies" (Zheng 2021, 528f). Here, embracing the specific language of blame enables us to challenge pacifying norms and better hold oppressive structures to account.

These kinds of cases bring to light the tension between exclusively using moral criticism to respond to failures to resist and the existence of particularly malicious and entrenched oppressors and institutions who will not be moved by this kind of approach. Conventional theories discussing oppression often incorporate notions of reparations, the redistribution of resources, the explicit identification of wrongdoers and the righting of previous and ongoing wrongs. Without blame, these notions lose much of their foundation.

To ask victims to sacrifice these avenues of social and material repayment is akin to asking them to absolve their own oppressors from blame. This leaves them restrained to even-handed and open-minded moral criticism all while enabling the continuation of the oppressive harms they experience. Even on a structural understanding of oppression, it seems there are cases where summative responses including blame *can* be justified, highly valuable and effectively mobilising (Zheng 2021, 527). It is unclear then, where exactly we should place the problem of oppression between the starkly different contexts of criminal liability and structural coordination problems.

Upon reflection, I believe there is an open question around how to weigh the – at times competing – approaches towards overcoming oppression and the moral responses that best facilitate this. In certain occasions, the harshness of summative responses "may outstrip their moral warrant: for example, by denouncing entire classes of people" (Ibid.). In others, victims who suffer heavily from oppressive harms may genuinely be benefitted from reparations, moral sanctions, and the validation of resentment.

It seems we can neither completely replace blame with moral criticism nor force blame to neatly apply to the range of moral problems oppression creates. If we take seriously that blame can further structural change in addition to purely formative approaches, then there will likely be a place for blame within whichever model of responsibility we use.

In response, Zheng suggests that summative and formative responses should be used together, with each providing a set of tools needed to accommodate certain aspects of oppression. Blame will enable us to call out and dismantle key contributors, manipulators, and enforcers of unjust social-structural processes. At the same time, moral criticism will promote reform, rehabilitation, the improvement of agency and the transformation of social-structural processes.

Structural responsibility frameworks are not alien to this approach of combining both structural and liability-focused analysis. Young herself states that SCM is not intended to "replace or reject the liability model", and that to explain large injustices as "rooted in personal responsibility or in structural causation, but not both" (2011, 4) is to present a false dichotomy.

Rather, a successful theory must work on both levels, using each model of responsibility (and their associated moral responses) where they best fit in ways that complement each other. Perhaps each agent can be ascribed two kinds of responsibility simultaneously in a hybrid manner. A backwards-looking structural responsibility that identifies "exercises of agency [that] provide legitimate grounds for blaming or punishing a person" (Zheng 2018, 872) and another forwards-looking interactional responsibility that distributes the burdens of structural change. Here, all agents would be structurally responsible for participating in collective transformative action while only those who engage in

oppressive interpersonal wrongs are responsible in the traditional liability sense as well. This hybrid approach to responsibility (See McKeown 2018; Beck 2020) offers an indirect method of accommodating notions of individual agency and blameworthiness into structural accounts of the responsibility to resist oppression.

The emergence of this hybrid approach facilitates the simultaneous use of moral criticism and blame, and thus resolves the issue of both appearing as valid and valuable responses to failures of resistance. However, two further concerns can be raised around the impact this compromise has on how we view the structural responsibility framework itself.

Firstly, a completed hybrid approach should be able to elaborate beyond merely *claiming* that structural responsibility can work alongside a liability model, and explain which liability models would be compatible and how analysis would be divided between the two. Given that the line between active and passive participation in structural injustice is blurred, whether an individual case counts as passive or active contribution will likely be contentious. For many grey-area cases, our judgement will likely depend, quite subjectively, on where we draw the line on permissible self-prioritisation in the face of others' suffering. To resolve this, a hybrid approach must set a principled distinction for when to use each model. Without this, we merely push back the question of which acts prompt blameworthiness to the question of which acts prompt the use of the liability model.

Secondly, there is a risk that the hybrid approach consolidates liability and structural analysis at the expense of pushing the brunt of explanatory work onto whichever accompanying liability model is chosen. It will be the liability model and not the structural model, that determines the details of when agents qualify for blame, what form or severity this will take, how blame will be resolved and so on. Given that these kinds of factors largely determine whether blameworthiness veers into victim blaming, if one takes a hybrid approach, the structural responsibility framework itself will provide little explanatory benefit in more nuanced cases.

3.5 Structural Responsibility as a Framework

As established in Chapter 2, a successful framework should provide the explanatory tools to understand when and why failing to resist is not blameworthy. The structural responsibility framework, typified by SCM, goes a long way towards this, outlining an alternative responsibility to resist without the implications of blame. Their answer is that responsibility for structural injustices is best understood as demanding forwards-looking collaborative action for which individual liability and blameworthiness are not applicable. By introducing the concept of moral criticism, structural responsibility is well-positioned to offer a substantial blame alternative with its own set of benefits and disadvantages. It manages to uphold the Functioning Agency claim by ascribing responsibility to victims, as well as lessening the blame associated with non-resistance in line with the Transformative Oppression claim.

Yet, the question of blame remains – moral criticism cannot claim all of the benefits that blame offers, and the framework is unable to account for the intuition that *some* agents genuinely are blameworthy within oppression. The most plausible route appears to be some form of a hybrid approach combining both structural and conventional liability models of responsibility. Introducing this level of complexity however invites further questions, and the hybrid approach is left largely undefined with both the liability component and the interaction between the two models requiring fleshing out into a unified multi-model of responsibility. Before this is developed, while the structural responsibility framework offers valuable insights into how we might lessen the burdens of moral reproach on victims, it remains incomplete as a response to VBO.

Chapter 4 – Respecting Victim Agency

4.1 Excuses and Structural Responsibility

Recall that the Victim Blaming Objection argues that ascribing responsibilities of resistance to victims of oppression involves problematically blaming victims when they inevitably fail these responsibilities due to oppressive influences outside of their control. Let us re-state the two key claims theories of resistance should balance to avoid this:

> *[A] Functioning Agency Claim:* victims are, on the whole, functioning moral agents for which moral responsibilities (including the prima facie responsibility to resist) are plausibly appropriate.
>
> *[B] Transformative Oppression Claim:* oppressive circumstances justify granting victims some kind of special consideration regarding their blameworthiness for non-resistance.

How well have the frameworks explored in Chapters 2 and 3 fared and what insight has this provided?

The Excuses Framework argument – that oppressive conditions create excusing circumstances – accommodates the Transformative Oppression Claim at the detriment of sacrificing the Functioning Agency Claim. Despite attempts to differentiate between excuse and exemption, the pervasiveness of oppression risks turning arguments granting excuses on its grounds into full-blown exemptions from responsibilities of resistance. However, victim agency appears much stronger than a wide application of excuses would otherwise suggest; upon closer inspection, many cases where victims reinforce oppression or actively resist it come across as genuinely cognisant and strategic exercises of agency.

However, correcting this by dialling back our ascription of excuses reduces the scope of cases that the framework accounts for, reducing its utility and leaving little clarity over when exactly an oppressive influence becomes excusing. These grey areas are of particular interest, especially given that two victims in similarly oppressive

circumstances can react very differently. The variety of ways victims express their agency suggests (as the Functioning Agency claim supports) that it is inaccurate and patronising to depict victims of oppression generally as experiencing temporary agential breakdowns even when we accept oppression's influence over victim agency. The excuses framework only points to this oppressive influence; it cannot explain and, importantly, appreciate the agency that *is* displayed by victims. In my view, this inability to accommodate the realities of victim agency is, even beyond inapplicability, the framework's key issue.

The Structural Responsibility Framework approaches VBO by developing structural responsibility as an alternative to conventional blame-associated responsibility, designing it to better match the collective and dynamic nature of structural injustice. The introduction of moral criticism furthers this by providing a tool for discussing and directing our goals of resistance through failures to resist without associating these discussions with accusations of blameworthiness. By tailoring structural responsibilities of resistance to accommodate for oppression's transformative effect on agency, and insisting on its widespread ascription, this framework better balances the two claims.

Nevertheless, *only* using structural responsibility even with the addition of moral criticism discounts compelling claims that significant wrongdoing – in the conventional liability sense – exists amongst oppressive society. In discussing cases with malicious intent and gratuitous harm, merely stretching moral criticism to fit seems insufficient when blame offers a more suitable alternative. This suggests that, like the excuses framework, structural responsibility cannot capture the vast and nuanced spectrum of ways victims exercise their agency and relatedly, the range of ways we wish to respond to this.

4.2 Making Space for Imperfect Agency

Both the Excuses and Structural Responsibility frameworks reveal crucial modifications for how we ought to understand how victims engage with oppression and resistance, and yet, both frameworks fall short by underselling the variety and extent of victim agency

that exists. I suggest that this pitfall deserves further attention and that doing so will reveal the value of placing the variety of what victim agency *can* achieve at the centre of our theories of resistance, above and beyond idealised conceptions of what this resistance *should* be. I believe this change allows theories to better accommodate the spectrum of victim experiences of oppression and thus manoeuvre the two claims underpinning VBO. To progress this shift in approach, let us re-examine the source of variety within victim agency, namely that agency within oppressive structures is imperfect.

Agency for both victims and non-victims is always shaped by the various structural and non-structural obstacles that block it. Rather than being an unfettered and perfect exercise of our will then, the reality is that agency is by default practised imperfectly and in direct relation to these obstacles. While our surrounding structures shape our agency in this way, we exercise this same agency to strategize our way around and influence the structures in turn. As this is the case across victims and non-victims, asserting that victims have imperfect agency in no way implies their agency is lesser than that of non-victims. Rather, given that we have no way of extracting agents from their surrounding social-structural processes, the imperfectness of actual agency suggests that it is our expectation of agency within our responsibilities of resistance that should change to better accommodate reality.

To highlight the presence and value of imperfect agency, we can consider Alisa Bierria's (2014) account of 'insurgent agency'. These cases involve victims operating within the constraints of oppressive structures – an apparent act of compliance – while nevertheless attempting to "temporarily destabliz[e], circumnavigat[e], or manipulat[e] those conditions in order to reach specific ends" (Ibid, 140). Think, for example, agents in oppressive work environments deliberately working slowly, inefficiently, or sabotaging equipment. Despite their continued participation upholding the work environment, their subtle acts of personal resistance likely matter a great deal to them, and in certain cases, represent the best they can currently do to express their agency (Scott 1985, 29).

Similarly, where oppression suppresses a group's ability to live a flourishing life, pursuing self-interested goals may reasonably be considered an act of overcoming oppression

(Silvermint 2013, 14). They are in a sense taking back what oppression has denied them, even if they lean on oppressive structures to achieve this. At the most basic level, for those whose right to exist is itself suppressed by oppressive society (certain LGBTQ+ groups might come to mind), the act of merely existing can itself be a valuable exercise of agency, and in fact, an act of personal resistance. Across the spectrum of victim experiences, it is apparent that even those under heavy oppressive influence appear to form a variety of goals and strategies, and meaningfully act in accordance with these intentions (Bierria 2014, 135).

Crucially, these acts typically differ greatly from the collective structural resistance explored in §3.1. They do not require coordination or planning and may not involve an intentional commitment or even contribution to confronting institutions and achieving structural change. Instead, they are often merely attempts to secure valuable goods for survival or a better quality of life, almost certainly perpetuating the oppressive structures they rely on in the process. Nevertheless, these attempts to leverage oppressive structures to benefit self-interest appear to be subtle but meaningful examples of "intentional action […] imagination and strategic thinking" (2014, 141) towards desired outcomes that make a huge difference for the individuals involved. Under this description, it seems plausible that these acts are examples of victims exercising their agency and indeed, forms of a more personal kind of resistance.

If this is the case, then given the unclear position these acts have in relation to resistance and compliance, we may need to expand our understanding of resistance. Our current approach classifies acts as either (1) successful acts of complete non-compliance, (2) failures attributed to a (non-blameworthy) breakdown of agency or (3) failures due to a (blameworthy) choice of compliance. In actuality, however, "a clear line between resistance and impermissible responses like complicity […] doesn't map onto the realities of oppression" (Silvermint 2018a, 25). Rather, as we've seen, many acts will simultaneously be both an act of resistance and compliance and thus be more accurately judged not as a failure to resist but as a kind of "partial or complicated resistance instead" (Ibid.), bringing a much wider range of acts into acceptable forms of resistance. To accommodate this change, our theories on the responsibility to resist may need to actively

make space for this partial resistance that stems from imperfect agency and alter the baseline of what is expected of us to account for and encourage these kinds of acts.

One reason widening our conceptions of agency and resistance is vital is that, as discussed in previous chapters, norms are in part enforced by our collective practices including how we actively conceptualise things. It is reasonable to believe that encouraging inaccurately limiting depictions of victim agency modelled only after those most debilitated by oppression skews our views of agency towards viewing victims as helpless to the pathologies of victimhood.

On a theoretical level, by failing to acknowledge the imperfect agency of disenfranchised agents, we interfere with our ability to differentiate between and thus holistically analyse and respond to cases across the wide variety of victim agency. Beyond this, however, excluding imperfect agency from our expectations of resistance involves "discounting and demeaning the agency that those in straitened circumstances do enjoy" (J. Wilson 2021, 177). The result is an over-emphasises of agency common to empowered groups, feeding into the depiction of victims and non-victims as functioning and non-functioning agents respectively. This obstructs any empowerment that might come with asserting that victims can and do take an active role in changing their circumstances, and at worst, calls into question why victims ought to be treated as functioning agents worthy of a certain moral and social position if they are not qualified as such.

Ultimately maintaining these conceptions of perfect agency and clear-cut resistance are both inaccurate and damaging, perpetuating the idea that a large set of victims are not fully functioning agents, and reinforcing the social-structural processes that suppress future exercises of agency (Bierria 2014, 135). I consider this desire to accurately depict and avoid suppressing imperfect victim agency within our theories of resistance a form of respecting (the reality of) victim agency.

I believe this desire to respect victim agency has, in fact, informed our Functioning Agency and Transformative Oppression claims throughout. We aim to balance the two because giving up either one disrespects the reality of victim agency – namely that it is both functional to the fullest extent we can make sense of, *and* that it is shaped and constrained

by oppression. Similarly, VBO reflects an ameliorative desire to shape our theories about oppression in a way that is not itself suppressive of victim agency. With this in mind, in addition to the Functioning Agency and Transformative Oppression claims, theories of resistance hoping to avoid VBO should accommodate a third over-arching claim:

> *[C] Respect Claim:* Respecting victim agency involves accommodating the full range of ways this agency is expressed and encouraging this agency wherever possible; this is antithetical to representations of victim agency as deficient.

In practice, how might theories of resistance prioritise respecting victim agency to overcome VBO? I suggest one approach is to build in concepts and frameworks that, rather than minimise victim agency's ability or importance, introduce a wider range of accepted forms of resistance to capture the imperfect nature of victim agency. To start, I believe there is value in re-applying the same frameworks we have explored so far.

Where oppression is coercive and ignorance-fostering, securing resources and pursuing personal flourishing should be emphasized as valuable acts of resistance rather than depicted as excused failures of agency. It is important to validate acts that allow agents to gradually secure their basic needs as these will in time improve their ability to engage with resistance in the future. Changing how we respond to coercive and ignorance-fostering circumstances allows us to acknowledge the current limitations of a victim's situation while affirming the limited forms of agency that exhibit growth towards a change in circumstances.

Similarly, the tools given by the structural responsibility framework shed light on the structural understanding of oppression our conceptualisation of imperfect agency relies on while providing direction on the types of resistance we should be aiming towards. The introduction of moral criticism, crucially understood as a kind of formative response rather than conventional 'criticism', provides a tool to handle the nuance of victim agency in cases of both resistance and compliance. Without the implication of blame, we can encourage discussions that direct us towards improving on our responsibilities to resist, acknowledging our agency without necessitating that this discussion carries with it a pass/fail evaluation.

I suggest we use these insights to re-frame our understanding of resistance as a form of aspirational morality discussed briefly in §3.4.2. On this approach, resistance is a scalar rather than binary property, holding a low baseline one must meet but having no upper limit nor criteria for completion. An agent cannot do *nothing* concerning their responsibilities to resist, but conversely, are always encouraged to do what they can with no upper limit of completion.

An appropriate baseline must be accessible to *all* victims regardless of their oppressive circumstances. One candidate is the requirement to be open to moral criticism regarding one's responsibilities of resistance, that is, one should *recognise* that this responsibility exists. As long as an agent is willing to engage in their critical faculties and work collectively with others to question their circumstances, contributions, and opportunities to resist, they are actively engaging in their responsibility to resist. The upshot here is that given that moral criticism depends on an agent being open to feedback and change, agents who reject this will have failed the baseline of the responsibility and can only then be judged as failing their responsibilities to resist. We can take responsibilities to combat climate change as an analogy – agents can interact in a variety of ways with this responsibility, but those that deny climate change have failed completely.

On my view, once an agent has met the baseline of recognising their responsibility to resist, they ought to pursue resistance to their highest ability balanced alongside other aims towards their well-being. Crucially, it is up to the agent themselves to determine what degree and type of resistance they are capable of and ultimately whether an act is an honest reflection of their current capabilities for resistance. Moreover, by not specifying a singular goal or success criteria for responsibilities of resistance, we avoid demanding "what 'should' be a victim's primary concern" (Silvermint 2018b, 32), or expecting that membership in a systematically disadvantaged group warrants determining one's ethical priorities solely around their oppressed identity. After all, who are we to insist that the concerns of food, security, fairness and well-being should always come secondary to that of structural change (Silvermint 2013, 12; 2018b, 28). By avoiding generalising and by extension, defining 'good' victims through "a local, privileged idea of

what resistance looks like" (Silvermint 2018a, 21), this approach hopefully encourages victims to pursue a wider variety of valid aims (Silvermint 2018b, 26).

While this places substantial authority on individual agents themselves, they are also continually encouraged towards a stronger commitment to resistance through the baseline of ongoing openness to moral criticism and the absence of a point of completion for the responsibility. To support this further, I suggest moral criticism extends to a communal responsibility to discuss and encourage resistance from others and provide formative feedback to help guide and refine agents towards collective structural change. This discussion will likely prompt awareness around the contributing factors and effects of oppression, helping to identify ways agents can adapt around their constraints and providing a means for agents to hold each other accountable within a constructive dialogue without defaulting to accusations of blameworthiness. We can understand this commitment to open dialogue as an empowered form of moral criticism, shifting from merely an alternative to blame towards an ever-present form of formative feedback and critical thinking.

By adjusting our expectations to fit the realities of imperfect agency under oppression, we can repurpose our frameworks (and presumably others) from a means of fitting theories of resistance to certain cases of victim agency, to instead using the range of victim agency to inform our theories of resistance. My approach encourages using a variety of frameworks together insofar as they provide insight into any aspect of victim experience without requiring them to apply to every oppressive circumstance. Granted, with overlapping frameworks it is all the more important to govern their interactions with an overarching principle. I suggest that the claim of respecting victim agency is an appropriate candidate to start, providing direction on what our theoretical tools should be in service of – namely fostering accurate and encouraging depictions of victim agency.

In line with these novel changes, we must re-configure how we discuss resistance from *fulfilling* our responsibilities of resist (suggesting a pass/failure point), to *furthering* our responsibilities. This change in mindset from the binary of blameworthy and non-blameworthy actions corresponding to compliance and resistance, towards a complex

and multi-layered theory that accepts the use of different tools to tackle various factors of oppression on a piecemeal basis. These amendments are vital, offering a means of avoiding blanket judgements of impaired agency or invalid resistance and instead encouraging agents to collectively mobilise and productively engage with their agency and moral community in methods and degrees still accessible to them. By tailoring theories of resistance to acknowledge the widest possible range of victim agency, the resulting theory is better positioned to be more sensitive to the "unique manifestations of oppression" (Silvermint 2018a, 22), embedding the highly nuanced context of victimhood within what we expect of ourselves and others within our unjust society.

4.3 Objection 1 – Weighing Competing Victim Testimonies

One might object that given how victims can vary in how they view their relationships with oppressive structures, introducing the Respect Claim undermines attempts to assert or manage responsibilities to resist. Cases like Superson's (1993) right-wing women where agents endorse and impose oppressive values onto other victims come to mind. These agents can simply claim that the supposedly oppressive traditionalist values genuinely facilitate them living fulfilling lives, providing them direction and meaning through, for example, looking after their families or practising chastity and meekness. If we defer to victim testimony, then how can we deny these values and goals and in turn, why should they have a responsibility to resist them?

In response, we might specify that the underlying motivation of the Respect Claim is the well-being of victims *as a group* as well as individually. Even if some victims insist on the value of oppressive structures, to fulfil the baseline of the responsibility they must still be appropriately moved by the unwanted limitations these structures place on other victims. It is part of their responsibility to weigh up the benefits they believe they receive with the suppression that other victims report. To deny the importance of wider victim well-being demonstrates a failure to achieve the baseline recognition of the responsibility to resist. Notably, the impact of resistance on victims who do and do not enjoy the traditionalist

aspects of oppressive norms is asymmetrical. While compliance perpetuates the suppression of resistance, choosing to resist does not (or at least should not) prevent others from living within traditionalist lifestyles. Thus, taking both testimonies at face value should still result in the judgement that the responsibility to resist should apply on grounds of wider victim well-being regardless of how individual victims relate to the oppressive norms in question.

As a second concern, if it is up to an agent's discretion whether they are pursuing their responsibility to resist at the best of their ability, there will likely be cases where victims disagree on whether an agent is resisting sufficiently. Some victims may shirk their responsibilities, using delusional claims about the extent of their oppressive constraints to justify committing oppressive wrongdoings.

I believe this risk is part and parcel of trusting and respecting victim agency. Luckily, this concern is somewhat mitigated by the formative way moral criticism frames success in relation to resistance and continually pushes agents towards structural change. The fact that agents themselves judge their actions is less contentious when what is at stake is not a pass/fail evaluation or the judgment of blameworthiness but merely each individual's personal journey towards collective structural change. In fact, as explored, moral criticism towards improvement will *always* be warranted whether as an internal dialogue or interpersonal discussion, as it will never be the case that an agent has completed their responsibilities of resistance. Thus, while victims maintain authority over their responsibilities of resistance, they are consistently challenged to re-consider their oppressive circumstances, capacities for resistance, and how they might grow these capacities going forward.

Another mitigation is the way that disagreement between victim testimonies is accounted for in the communal and discursive element of moral criticism. If we believe that a victim is shirking their responsibilities, overemphasising their oppressive constraints or merely ignorant of reality, it is part of *our* responsibility of resistance to raise these points. Through open discussion, we can gauge both whether an agent is open to critical inquiry (and thus whether they meet the baseline of the responsibility) and identify the source of

disagreement over the agent's efforts. If it is revealed that the agent flippantly undervalues the well-being of other victims, then we can judge them as morally insensitive "to the full range of [relevant] moral considerations" (Silvermint 2018a, 35). This process itself can help those involved better understand the agent's circumstances and bring to light considerations that either party may not have taken into consideration. Not only does this highlight new avenues for the agent to further their capacities for resistance, but it also encourages empathy and understanding within the moral community.

With these mitigations in mind, I believe that prioritising victim agency and testimony through the Respect Claim does not substantially undermine the core foundation of positing responsibilities to resist, nor our abilities to manage conflicts between the experiences and beliefs of different victims.

4.4 Objection 2 – The Absence of Directive Content

Let's consider a second objection: that employing a range of theoretical frameworks rather than pursuing a single unified theory is a trade-off between extensive applicability to individual cases and practicality of use. One might argue that our approach of 'extensive itemisation' is too cumbersome to be effective (Silvermint 2018a, 28), leaving us too devoid of actual directive content to be useful in understanding and applying responsibilities to resist. Questions may arise on what frameworks we should include when to use which framework, and which to prioritise in conflicts. If this same effort could be put towards tweaking alternative theories to overcome their objections, our multi-framework approach risks losing its pragmatic edge.

In response, it may be helpful to clarify that the takeaway of the approach is not to consider *all* frameworks but rather to choose them in line with what *we* find most helpful, even if this involves limiting ourselves to a much smaller set of frameworks. As long as we are less wary of incorporating tools insofar as they are helpful to our understanding of

victim experience, and we keep in mind our guiding principle of respecting victim agency, we can pick and choose how we incorporate frameworks at our own speed.

One might nevertheless argue that even with fewer frameworks, the lack of cohesion when combining them may be detrimental to judging individual cases and specifying how agents ought to pursue structural change. While our frameworks might *in theory* judge an act to be insufficient resistance, in practice we may be stuck deliberating which framework to use and how to best conceive of the agency and circumstance in question. This may paralyse our ability to determine what our responsibilities of resistance expect of us and indeed whether we have failed them and thus are blameworthy.

I wish to tackle this objection with three points: first, balancing various theoretical elements is typical of normal moral deliberation; second, moral criticism can sufficiently guide us through this confusion and towards structural change; and third, this approach is compatible with utilising summative moral responses like blame without waiting for the deliberation of moral criticism to 'finish'.

On the first point, we should keep in mind that rather than pursuing one ideal ad infinitum, moral decision-making frequently involves weighing up sometimes conflicting guidance from a variety of moral principles and schools of thought. Realistically, we are already in the habit of identifying when to use various theoretical tools to best fit certain situations. Therefore, depicting the multi-framework approach as involving the juggling of theoretical tools merely spells out our existing approach explicitly, with this being itself a form of engaging with our responsibilities to resist. Potentially, by focusing moral criticism around discussing the application of these tools, we can turn our previously internal deliberation into a communal means of analysing and resolving ignorance regarding oppression.

On the second point, it is valuable to re-stress that my suggested approach to responsibilities to resist involves committing to a genuine shift in how we view this responsibility. Recall that while blame *can* be a useful tool in establishing the severity of a moral imperative, the specific value of moral criticism is its rejection of hierarchical and finite resolutions to moral issues. If we are committed to viewing oppression as a

structural injustice best transformed through ongoing and collaborative structural change, it is less important to neatly conclude whether a particular rule of resistance has been breached and thus whether an agent is blameworthy. Instead, we should de-emphasise these moments of judgement paralysis, viewing them as merely part of the intended process of gradual and collective understanding of oppression and resistance. Given the phenomena we're trying to analyse is socially constituted and varies widely, identifying one right way of resisting oppression will likely be less helpful than discussing and gaining insight into the various contributing factors, testimonies and paths forward.

To our last point, we should not wait for moral criticism to be 'complete' before we utilise other tools to facilitate transformative change, including blame. To refresh, we should avoid judging agents as blameworthy for failing their responsibilities to resist unless they have failed the baseline of recognition. However, there *are* a host of things that agents can still be blameworthy for in relation to how they interact with each other within oppression, specifically, the conventional set of moral wrongs i.e. disrespect, prejudice, harm and so on.

Key examples are cases of interpersonal wrongdoing within the context of oppression, for example, using a slur or discriminating against a victim group. These wrongs are oppressive in the sense that understanding the full extent of the action may rely on analysis regarding the wider social-structural processes. However, as briefly touched on in §3.3, for the agents involved, it can still be valuable to also analyse these cases on an interpersonal level, utilising the hierarchical and finite nature of blameworthiness to facilitate moral resolution. Having the wrongdoer acknowledge blameworthiness and apologise for these wrongs can somewhat restore the moral relationship between the two agents, even if the wider structural injustices have not been accounted for and the wrong in question is not classified as a failure to resist. After all, as individuals within communities, we do not only care about resistance and greater structural change; in fact, the individual interactions we have with others will likely matter to us more immediately.

There is also a case to be made that to encourage structural change, it is appropriate to implement summative responses for specific policies and laws. This can be to deter

certain actions on a wider scale, neutralising the accumulation of power and personal interests and guiding behaviour towards communal goals. This might include punishing organised acts of discrimination, safeguarding freedom of discussion, and protecting basic rights without which resistance would not be feasible.

Of course, the summative response of punishment carries implications of blameworthiness. However, I do not believe this conflicts with a formative understanding of the responsibility of resistance; instead suggesting that artificial summative checkpoints can facilitate change towards formative improvement. This synergy between summative and formative responses can be seen in everyday life as well. When we take a wider perspective over our entire lives, it becomes clear that many of our summative evaluations (exams, promotions, and so on), are in fact, artificially structured to act as checkpoints in service of our wider development. Upon the completion or failure of any of these individual checkpoints, we do not cease developing or consider our lives to be over. Rather, we take from each checkpoint the set of skills and life lessons that we apply onwards to the next evaluation. In this sense, our seemingly summative evaluations contribute to a wider formative process of lifelong development.

There may be benefits in utilising varying methods of formative and summative responses together to combat oppressive structures and the individual cases of oppressive wrongdoing that occur within them. For example, the threat of blame may create a point of pressure, prompting agents to view moral criticism more palatably when they would have otherwise been unwilling to collaborate. All in all, it seems perfectly plausible to both conceptualise our responsibilities to resist formatively, while introducing artificial summative checkpoints complete with blameworthiness to facilitate change towards it.

While the concern of decision paralysis is understandable at first, if we acknowledge the multi-tool deliberation that already occurs in our decisions, and accept a shift from decision-focused to discussion-focused theory, I believe that the apparent lack of directive content is less problematic. Beyond this, when we consider our responsibilities for resistance within the context of our wider moral responsibilities as well as through the lens of policy and law, we can see that summative responses including blame can be

utilised in and around the responsibility to resist without undermining its overall formative conceptualisation. All in all, validating a wider range of responses and placing the decision largely with agents themselves offers freedom to victims in choosing how they engage with resistance, as well as how they respond to oppressive wrongdoing. This, in my view, is yet another form of practising respect for victim agency.

4.5 Conclusion

The position we end with is the same one we started with: agents, including victims of oppression, have responsibilities to resist oppression. Oppression's nature as a structural injustice presents non-resistance as an implicit act of compliance; yet another contributing factor in a web of factors that, taken together, perpetuate oppression. Within this however, there is enormous variety in the ways that victims exercise their agency whether they reinforce their ignorance, leverage their victimhood to secure what benefits they can, or collectively mobilise towards structural change.

Through my analysis, I have posited a structural responsibility to resist oppression underpinned by our inevitable contributions to oppressive social-structural processes. This responsibility compels us to pull away, where we can, from these contributions with the acknowledgement that this is impossible to do entirely. While structural change is most effectively achieved through collective action towards removing or changing norms and institutions that uphold unjust processes, I have suggested we should not limit the responsibility to resist to these actions.

Rather, I have suggested we fundamentally re-frame this responsibility to match structural resistance's ongoing and collaborative nature, stepping away from a pass/fail binary and instead taking a formative approach that encourages a sliding scale of resistance all of which can be considered valid. Specifically, I posit a baseline of recognising one's responsibility to resist, expressed through an open-ness to moral deliberation of what an agent can or hypothetically could do to further this resistance. Beyond this, however, it is up to the agent to inquire within their circumstances and

identify the extent of resistance they can achieve and the means by which they can pursue this.

With this change in mind, the way we respond to others' responsibilities to resist must similarly shift to a formative approach that prioritises open and ongoing discussion referred to here as moral criticism. This discussion helps agents resolve ignorance and encourage further commitment to responsibilities to resist rather than merely produce finite judgements of failure and blameworthiness. The process also fosters patience and empathy towards victims, avoiding the invalidation of how they interpret their own well-being, and imploring them to consider the well-being of other victims in their community.

As explored, it is a deliberate result that this approach widens the range of valid forms of resistance and can even include activities that appear to just involve securing resources and furthering individual wellbeing. However, because there is no upper limit to furthering one's responsibilities to resist, merely pursuing self-benefit will likely be insufficient as a form of resistance in cases where victims exist comfortably. To manoeuvre this question of capacity, it is ultimately up to victims themselves to decide what they can reasonably achieve, though they are supported in this by others discussing with them how they might further resist, even where this might not be possible yet. By framing the ideal output of our responsibility to resist as an ongoing commitment to resistance rather than a finite list of acts to complete, we as agents benefit from discussions of resistance even when they are currently out of our reach. This is facilitated by a range of theoretical tools, a license to identify additional frameworks that highlight particular experiences of oppressive victimhood, and guidance to evaluate these frameworks on grounds of respecting victim agency.

I acknowledge that there are various points of tension in this project. For one, there may be some resistance to discussing moral philosophy in terms of formative responses and over-arching patterns of behaviour. Classically, it is easier and perhaps more intuitive to pick individual acts out and analyse them in detail rather than take a wider perspective and focus analysis on how the institutions and relationships between these acts are maintained or transformed. But it is this latter approach that is needed if we accept that

both oppression and its solutions are structural in nature. I believe that insofar as we accept that morality and agency can just as importantly be about the *ongoing process* of engaging with our surrounding structures than about a small number of ultra-important decisions, the formative approach will be easier to acclimate to.

Another source of tension is between the severity given to the problematic implications of victim blaming (too much or too little), and the laissez-faire solution of letting the agent decide whether they have done enough for their responsibilities to resist. One can argue that the only reason we have avoided VBO is by leaving too much to the individual. This approach may breed complacency, with agents acknowledging the responsibility to resist (and thus passing the baseline) but systematically letting themselves off the hook when it comes to actually delivering the structural change this responsibility is aimed towards. Agents may naturally over-value their own interests of comfort and may chronically underestimate how much they can achieve.

I do however believe that if we accept that oppression is a structural injustice, that contributing to it in some way is inevitable, and that overly blaming victims is cruel and counterintuitive, the approach that I have outlined will have a substantial comparative advantage to the frameworks explored so far. Prioritising the exercise of victim agency and accommodating its wide variety of circumstances is, in my view, worth the cost of rescinding central authority over judgements of blameworthiness. Considering the value that moral criticism brings towards structural change, I am also comfortable sacrificing the conventionally large role that summative evaluation (in the form of blameworthiness) occupies in the responsibility to resist oppression, using it on a more piecemeal basis instead. In its stead, we gain the substantial benefit of embodying respect for victim agency through the mechanisms of the theory itself. We give agents the authority over how they engage with their responsibilities of resistance, trust them to analyse their own moral and political circumstances and engage with their fellow agents to better understand this. It is the agents who take ownership over exercising their agency towards transformative change going forward.

Ultimately, I believe my suggestion of conceptualising victim responsibilities to resist through a formative lens goes a large way to mitigating the Victim Blaming Objection. It gives us a feasible avenue to meaningfully posit and ascribe responsibilities of resistance to victims of oppression without inevitably and unfairly blaming victims when, of course, blame does not follow immediately on from suboptimal or ineffective resistance. Moreover, by explicitly identifying the connection between victim non-resistance and oppressive harms as indirect, collective, and inescapable in some shape or form, we re-frame cases of partial resistance not as failures, but as complicated exercises of agency within oppressive influences. I do not consider what I have posited as a perfect or even complete approach to the responsibilities of resisting oppression. However, by taking a pluralistic approach and actively encouraging the incorporation of additional tools guided by collaborative critical inquiry, I believe the approach's limitations are mitigated against and can be further developed on. Ultimately, we do not need to reject either the Functional Agency or the Transformative Oppression Claim – both can be accepted by widening the range of acceptable exercises of victim agency to match the reality of imperfect agency under oppression. The end result is a re-contextualisation of how we should engage with our responsibilities to resist and what can reasonably be expected from agents within an oppressive society.

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