# Tainted Morality: Systemic Oppression and Moral Responsibility

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**Abstract:** It is commonly believed that people who act autonomously are morally responsible for their actions. However, for those living under oppressive social conditions where their autonomy is challenged, whether from a lack of unforced options or a lack of moral epistemic background, the task of assigning moral responsibility for their actions is less obvious. On the one hand, it would be morally wrong to exempt people living under conditions of oppression from moral responsibility as this carries troubling consequences of stripping them of any claim to agency for their actions. On the other hand, it is difficult to assign appropriate blame when oppression interferes with autonomy. This essay explores moral frameworks and practices that consider how oppression can complicate and inform the standards for judging moral responsibility by answering the question: when autonomy is constrained by oppression, how should our practices of praise and blame adjust accordingly? I argue that while oppressive conditions may restrict agency, this does not eliminate moral responsibility for oppressed individuals, and I contend that analyzing oppressive contexts can offer valuable insight for improving our moral frameworks. I begin by constructing a theory of autonomy that preserves and sustains autonomy for individuals living under conditions of oppression. By demonstrating how autonomy is attainable for oppressed individuals, I then consider two theories that focus on the social aspect of moral responsibility and how we can adjust our moral practices according to one's social position.

Barry lives in a society that formally protects whistleblowers and values freedom of speech. When he witnesses an injustice at work, the risks Barry faces as a wealthy privileged natural citizen are minimal: perhaps some awkwardness with colleagues or mild social discomfort. Yet Barry chooses not to speak up. Maryam lives in that same society, but her position within it is very different. Maryam also witnesses an unjust act, and she too refuses to speak up. As a member of a marginalized immigrant community, she knows that speaking out against injustice can bring serious consequences: loss of employment, targeted harassment or retaliation against her family. Silence is the norm among those in her position. Should we blame Maryam less than Barry?



These examples highlight a tension between moral responsibility and the social conditions required for the exercise of personal autonomy. Moral philosophers have long noted that autonomy can be curtailed by oppression and social positionality, either because oppression limits one's ability to reflect critically, or constrains the range of options available.[1] While these opening examples are deliberately stark, oppressive conditions can be subtle and varied, though no less pervasive.[2] It seems reasonable to think oppressive conditions affect the degree of moral responsibility we assign, which raises the question: when autonomy is constrained by oppression, should our practices of praise and blame adjust accordingly? This paper explores how oppression complicates the standards for judging moral responsibility. I argue that while oppressive conditions may restrict autonomy, this does not eliminate moral responsibility for oppressed individuals. I contend that analyzing oppressive contexts can provide valuable insight for improving moral frameworks.

I begin this paper by illustrating how autonomy can be preserved under conditions of oppression using Diana Meyer's competency-based model of autonomy.[3] Since we suppose that people who are responsible for their actions acted autonomously, in oppressive conditions where one's autonomy is seemingly threatened, Meyers instructively demonstrates how autonomy can be maintained under conditions of oppression. The second part of this paper explores how assigning moral responsibility is ultimately a social practice that should consider agents' actions and reasons from their social positionalities. Michael McKenna's conversational model notes that dialogical exchanges can reveal the meaning of a person's action and assign moral praise or blame accordingly. I contend, however, that McKenna's model for assigning moral responsibility falls short as he does not consider how conversational norms and biases can themselves be oppressive.

To repair these shortcomings, I turn to Manuel Vargas' scalar and forward-looking model of moral responsibility.[4] He posits that oppression is a tool for moral accountability, improvement, and transformation. Meyers, McKenna and Vargas' accounts of autonomy and moral responsibility each play an essential role to develop this paper's broader methodological lesson: systemic oppression and injustice in our moral system can be confronted and remedied, if practices of moral praise and blame are conducted with attention to an agent's social positionality and their capacity to be autonomous, and recognize and respond to moral concerns.

## The Impacts of Socialization on Autonomy and Moral Responsibility

Autonomy is central to moral responsibility because holding someone morally responsible presupposes their capacity to reason and act without external or psychological constraint. If an individual lacks the ability to make decisions independently, it is difficult to argue they

1 Christopher Bennett, "The Varieties of Retributive Experience," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 52, no. 207 (2002): 145–63; Victoria McGeer, "Mind-Making Practices: The Social Infrastructure of Self-Knowing Agency and Responsibility," *Philosophical Explorations* 18, no. 2 (2015): 259–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2015.1032331; Susan Hurley, "The Public Ecology of Responsibility," in *Responsibility and Distributive Justice*, ed. Carl Knight and Zofia Stemplowska (Oxford University Press, 2013).

2 Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," in *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance*, ed. Lisa Heldke and Peg O'Connor (McGraw-Hill, 2004).

3 Diana Meyers, "Personal Autonomy and the Paradox of Feminine Socialization," *The Journal of Philosophy* 84, no. 11 (1987): 619–28, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2026764.

4 Manuel R. Vargas, "The Social Constitution of Agency and Responsibility," in *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, ed. Katrina Hutchison, Catriona Mackenzie, and Marina Oshana (Oxford University Press, 2018).

can justly be held accountable for those decisions. Personal autonomy is traditionally understood as the capacity to govern oneself independently, rather than being governed by others. A common philosophical tenet is that in order to govern oneself, one must shape their life by making unimpeded decisions that are consistent with their will, desires and values.[5] However, I argue that traditional accounts of autonomy focus excessively on merely intrapersonal conditions of autonomy and disregard the experiences of oppressed individuals, who are not independent from the wills of others.

It is against this background that I examine Diana Meyers' work where she posits that in cases of external social constraint, autonomy is still accessible. She illustrates how feminine socialization, the process by which girls are raised and encouraged to enact feminine gender norms, desires, and roles, may prevent women from meeting the criteria of autonomy in the traditional sense, which, in turn, contributes to their gender subordination. As women are socialized to cultivate feminine traits (e.g., empathy, accommodation, and care), and adopt feminine roles (e.g., wife, mother, domestic, submissive), they may be socialized to put others' needs before their own. A woman may feel obliged to sacrifice her desire for comfort to prioritize another's needs, which would undermine her capacity to act autonomously, because her decision, motivated by social expectations, does not align with her will and desire: society encourages her to sideline her desires for others' sake.[6] Since these values, desires and roles are socially enforced, women' agency is bypassed, whether or not they genuinely endorse them.

Based on these social conditions, one may be tempted to infer that women do not meet the criteria for autonomy and may not be autonomous at all. That inference, however, carries a troubling consequence: it risks stripping women of their claim to agency in all contexts. In a sense, it punishes the victims of oppression by further dismissing their voices as non-genuine and not truly theirs. To counter this problem, Meyers contends that these socialized habits do not necessarily negate women's autonomy altogether, if an account of autonomy can consider social inequality. She proposes three alternative forms of autonomy that challenge the view of autonomy as an unconditional, absolute, or all-encompassing capacity: episodic, narrowly programmatic, and partial access autonomy. Each explains how autonomy is preserved despite feminine socialization.

Episodic autonomy denies that autonomy is a stable, ongoing state. Rather, autonomy can be exercised in discrete moments or 'episodes' when one makes a decision that aligns with one's immediate attitudes.[7] For example, a stay-at-home mother may lead a prescribed life shaped by social expectations of fulfilling her domestic and mothering duties. Despite these prescribed expectations, she can make daily decisions where she exercises her autonomy in snapshot moments, such as choosing what to cook or who she interacts with. Episodic autonomy recognizes that people living under restrictive conditions may only find pockets of autonomy through occasional, immediate moments, which nonetheless matter for their self-expression and moral agency. In such cases, the fact that her agency is constrained in many domains by social structures does not remove her capacity to act autonomously with respect to these episodic opportunities.

The second form of autonomy, narrowly programmatic autonomy, is exercised when someone makes small but consequential decisions about their life, even if their life, on a broader and more fundamental level, is not autonomous.[8] For instance, a woman who has been socialized to want to have a family may not be able to decide whether she wants children, but she can make smaller-scale crucial, life-altering decisions about when to have children, how many to have or what contraception she uses. She can meaningfully assert her agency and make important life decisions even if they are partial and relatively narrow. While episodic autonomy addresses autonomous decisions that align with immediate attitudes in a particular moment, narrowly programmatic autonomy enables one to make more impactful decisions that can shape one's life in significant but comparatively small scope.

Lastly, partial access autonomy, describes autonomy that is expressed with varying degrees of intensity or completeness.[9] Without fully or openly acting on one's desires or values, someone can modulate, conceal, or temper their autonomous expression due to social pressures or constraints. For example, one may downplay the strength of her desires or mask her true feelings to conform to social expectations yet still retain some degree of control over self- expression. Partial access autonomy recognizes that even limited or constrained expressions of autonomy can count as meaningful exercises of agency. Together, these three forms of autonomy, where autonomy may be discontinuous, domain-specific, or expressed partially rather than fully, expand the traditional conception of autonomy by accounting for the complexities of living under oppressive social conditions.

Meyers notably posits that these alternative forms of autonomy must be achieved through the exercise of a "repertoire" of cognitive skills, such as contemplation, evaluation, and imagination.[10] This repertoire, which she calls "autonomy-competency," requires an active, deliberate control: "autonomy is something that a person *accomplishes*, not something that happens to a person."[11] To achieve autonomy-competency, one is propelled to engage these innate cognitive skills, all of which depend on one's social environment to enable the exercise of these skills. Meyers notes that some people may be unable to develop autonomy-competency due to oppressive social contexts that limit reflection, evaluation, imagination, or decision-making opportunities: for example, if someone never learned to contemplate their life or available decisions, Meyers believes they cannot develop autonomy.[12]

Meyers' analysis of autonomy-competency, however, replicates a difficulty she raised in the traditional accounts of autonomy in that autonomy can be curtailed by one's social circumstances: if one is not in an environment where they can develop this competency, they risk never enacting and developing the skills required for autonomy. This limitation undermines her account as she hopes to develop possibilities for autonomy yet posits that autonomy risks never being developed if these cognitive capacities for autonomy-competency are either present in an all-encompassing way or absent altogether. In response to this limitation, I attempt to preserve autonomy by offering a distinction between two types of social impact on autonomy. The first is the impact of social conditions on autonomy-competency itself (one's basic ability to exercise autonomy with one's skills), and the second is the impact of social conditions on the alternative accounts of autonomy we can access (episodic, narrowly pragmatic, or partial forms). In the former, social conditions impact how an individual *becomes*

5 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, rev. ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2012).
6 Meyers, "Personal Autonomy," 624.
7 Meyers, "Personal Autonomy," 625.
8 Meyers, "Personal Autonomy," 626.
9 Meyers, "Personal Autonomy," 626.
10 Meyers, "Personal Autonomy," 626.
11 Meyers, "Personal Autonomy," 626, emphasis added.
12 Meyers, "Personal Autonomy," 626.

autonomous (as in their ability to engage in their skills required for autonomy), whereas, in the latter type, social conditions impact how an individual *acts* autonomously (by engaging in her alternative forms of autonomy). One's *being* autonomous can be impeded to different degrees (mildly, severely, completely), and in different ways (affecting one's imagination, one's capacity to reason, etc.). Likewise, the ability to *act* autonomously can be impeded to different degrees and in different ways (how many episodic opportunities present themselves; how much partial agency can be expressed; how many programmatic choices are available). Complete denial of autonomy-competency may result in complete loss of autonomous action. But short of that, there are many combinations of these two aspects of autonomy that we could encounter. This distinction proves useful so as not to wholeheartedly abandon the 'all or nothing' possibility for autonomy: we may not *be* autonomous, but we can *act* autonomously sometimes.

Meyers' project denotes alternative forms of autonomy in light of socialization and oppression, relaying the complexities of achieving autonomy within the context of social inequalities and positionality, both of which are essential features of holding someone morally responsible for their actions. Now that I have demonstrated that autonomy is possible under conditions of oppression, the next part of this essay looks to McKenna and Vargas who illustrate how moral responsibility is a social and structural process that must consider oppression into the calculation of assigning praise or blame to moral actions.

**McKenna's Conversational Model of Moral Responsibility**

Michael McKenna considers the pertinence of the social aspect of moral responsibility, namely the relational and dialogical components. He believes we are responsible not just because of what we do, but how our actions are interpreted by and responded to within a moral community. McKenna's theory emphasizes a conversational model of moral responsibility. Moral responsibility, he claims, unfolds in a dynamic exchange between an agent and their community. The community evaluates the agent's "quality of will" as expressed through the explanation for their action and behaviour.[13] If someone acts immorally and does not display a good quality of will, the community engages in a moral "conversation" with the agent, seeking an explanation to reveal their moral motivations and orientation. From this conversation, the moral community interprets the action and assigns praise or blame accordingly. This interpretive component is important: our actions do not transpire in isolation; they are assessed and interpreted by one's community. Through an exchange, the moral community assesses responsibility by getting a clearer picture of the agent's intentions and shapes their future behaviour by reinforcing moral norms.

McKenna highlights two social conditions that complicate the standards of holding people morally accountable in these conversations: control conditions and epistemic conditions.[14] Control conditions concern the extent to which an agent is free to act according to their own will, without coercion or undue influence.[15] For example, if Eric is ordered by his boss to fire a pregnant coworker for discriminatory reasons, and fears he might get fired if he disobeys, then his moral culpability is mitigated by the coercive power his employer holds. Epistemic conditions, contrastingly, concern the extent to which an agent is reasonably expected to know or understand the moral weight of their actions given their social position.[16] For example, if Carson, who was raised in an isolated, monocultural white community, compliments a racialized coworker's English skills, he may not understand his action for what it is: a microaggression. His compliment reflects his epistemic ignorance rather than his intentional malice: due to his unique interactions with fluent English-speakers, he is unaware how his comment reinforces harmful assumptions.

McKenna argues that control and epistemic conditions should be considered when assigning moral responsibility because they shape access to knowledge, freedom, and moral vocabulary. Epistemic and control conditions, however, do not absolve responsibility wholeheartedly; rather, it qualifies how we hold people accountable for their actions.[17] We blame someone differently if they acted intentionally, or out of coercion or ignorance, because in the latter cases, we blame people as a means for them to learn and correct. In this way, McKenna considers a person's social identity and positionality in making a judgment of their moral conduct.

While McKenna highlights the control and epistemic conditions that influence whether a person deserves praise or blame for their actions, he does not consider how these conditions could affect the conversation that assesses moral responsibility. McKenna invites us to express ourselves to each other, yet he misses an important detail: just having the conversation is not enough. Dominant social groups often determine the moral standards that underwrite blame and praise. They control the very terms of the conversation—its norms, language, and etiquette. In other words, since responsibility is underwritten by conversational practices, control of conversational norms can entail control over who is heard, whose voices are authoritative, and which forms of speech are treated as legitimate expressions of agency. We must have conversations with an eye on the processes that make them unequal, and how oppression can impact interpersonal dialogue in the first place.

Miranda Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice is instructive to the concern for conversational power dynamics and biases as she highlights how marginalized individuals are often wronged in their capacity as knowers: their testimonies are dismissed, their moral perspectives are unheard, and experiences misinterpreted due to prejudice embedded in the moral community's conversational norms. Moreover, her concept of hermeneutical injustice highlights the absence of conceptual and interpretive frameworks that acknowledge and understand the experiences of marginalized groups. These experiences are rendered unintelligible to the collective that interprets moral actions.[18] If actors' testimonies lack recognition and

13 Michael McKenna, "Power, Social Inequities, and the Conversational Theory of Moral Responsibility," in *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, ed. Katrina Hutchison, Catriona Mackenzie, and Marina Oshana (Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

14 McKenna, "Power, Social Inequities," 10.

15 John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control: An Essay on Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511814594.

16 McKenna, "Power, Social Inequities," 6.

17 Cheshire Calhoun, "Responsibility and Reproach," *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989): 389–406, https://doi.org/10.1086/293071; Michele M. Moody-Adams, "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," *Ethics* 104, no. 2 (1994): 291–309, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2381578; Jennifer Saul, "Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat, and Women in Philosophy," in *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change*, ed. Fiona Jenkins and Katrina Hutchison (Oxford University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199325603.003.0003; Jules Holroyd, "Two Ways of Socializing Moral Responsibility," in *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, ed. Katrina Hutchison, Catriona Mackenzie, and Marina Oshana (Oxford University Press, 2018); Michael Brownstein, "Attributionism and Moral Responsibility for Implicit Bias," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 7, no. 4 (2016): 765–86, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-015-0287-7.

18 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 148.

the hermeneutical resources to acknowledge and justify their actions, then our conversational practices of moral responsibility are biased and inadequate at thoroughly considering oppression. Fricker's work emphasizes the exclusion of marginalized people from the creation of moral standards, practices and conversations, which McKenna's conversational model overlooks. He does not acknowledge the social imbalances of moral meaning and discourse. This prompts an important consideration: if moral responsibility relies on biased social dialogue, are we able to fairly and effectively assess moral responsibility through conversations?

McKenna's framework is appealing insofar as it invites us to explain ourselves to each other in conversation, fostering an understanding between members of the moral community. However, insofar as the norms and resources that guide these conversations are shaped by oppressive practices that overlook marginalized testimonies, experiences and understandings, the dialogical model is a limiting tool in assigning moral responsibility. We must have conversation with an eye on the processes (e.g., social norms and biases) that make it unequal. Vargas offers resources for answering how to repair or re-shape responsibility practices in light of structural inequalities and oppression.

**Vargas' Social Constitution of Agency and Moral Reform**

Manuel Vargas argues that we can morally improve the norms of the social practice of moral responsibility, even within oppressive contexts. I began this essay discussing Meyers, who offered a theory that bridges social considerations, such as the context of oppression, with autonomy. Building on this, I then turned to McKenna's proposal, which advances the discussion of conversational moral responsibility, understanding it as a social process of negotiation with one's moral community. Now, Vargas's framework allows us to take a normative and corrective possibility for moral responsibility, offering a way to cultivate agency that is responsive to bias, oppression, and the possibility of reform. To this end, he proposes an agent-cultivation model: actors can cultivate a form of agency that is sensitive to moral considerations such as potential biases, the pervasive impact of oppression and power imbalances, and the possibility of reform. In effect, this amounts to an ameliorative project of consciousness-raising, aimed not merely at individuals but at the very practices through which responsibility is attributed and negotiated.

As we saw earlier in Meyers's proposal, Vargas makes claims to internal capacities and one's social environment to support his ameliorative project. Psychological capacities, according to Vargas, include cognitive and affective dispositions, like reasoning, empathy, understanding and self-reflection, that allow one to recognize, deliberate, and respond appropriately to moral conflict.[19] These capacities tend to be relatively stable, and they are formed through reactive attitudes and feedback one receives from their social environment.[20] For example, if Harper sees her brother's being punished for stealing, she cognitively assesses this consequence and understands that she should not steal if she wants to avoid punishment. Harper develops this cognitive reasoning because she was exposed to a situation that prompted her to practice and apply it, exemplifying how psychological capacities are partly socially constituted. The second component of psychological capacities is how a moral community

19 Manuel R. Vargas, "The Social Constitution of Agency and Responsibility," in *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, ed. Katrina Hutchison, Catriona Mackenzie, and Marina Oshana (Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.

20 Vargas, "The Social Constitution of Agency," 8.



instills values and commitments that influence rational decision-making.[21] If a community demonstrably values family, its members' rationality tends to reflect that value. One's moral community is also shaped by power structures. Since both psychological capacities and environment are socially situated and interact with one another, our moral agency is ecologically embedded and responds to the social-moral ecology surrounding us. The ecology, however, may well include oppression.[22]

Despite oppression's pervasive effects, Vargas warns against excusing moral responsibility outright based on subjugation. Doing so risks undermining individuals' cognitive capacities and agency and ultimately challenges their integrity.[23] Oppression may limit but does not necessarily eliminate morally adequate options. Vargas proposes a scalar and asymmetrical system of moral culpability that accounts for oppression's impact on individuals' beliefs and deliberations, including internalized harmful norms and cultural scripts.[24] For instance, a woman expressing misogyny shaped by pervasive patriarchal norms may be partially excused due to internalized oppression, but excusing her entirely would prevent her from re-evaluating and overcoming these sexist beliefs. Thus, oppression can diminish culpability but does not absolve agency or responsibility altogether.

This scalar approach indicates that moral responsibility is graded in proportion to social positioning within power structures. So, two individuals committing the same harmful act may bear different levels of moral culpability depending on their social position. Vargas suggests that oppressors, whether consciously or not, can benefit from nefarious social arrangements, and may be responsible for the production or persistence of oppressive social circumstances.[25] Importantly, the powerful and subordinate are both held responsible, though, to different degrees and for different reasons.[26] The proportionate praise and blame affirm responsible agency even amid oppression, and this can prove to be a powerful tool to highlight overlooked moral considerations and opening avenues for cultivating moral sensitivity.[27] If oppression is factored into moral systems, we thereby become sensitive and conscious of oppression as a morally sensitive phenomenon that can harm someone. Developing this awareness can be a strategy for moral growth, which Vargas calls the agent cultivation model.

Vargas is attempting to resolve a dilemma with the agent cultivation model. On the one hand, he aims to give an account of autonomy that is sensitive to descriptive, non-ideal facts of one's social environment. On the other hand, he seeks a normative account, not one that merely describes existing practices, but one that can tell us what we ought to do, qualified by our current structures of oppression. He emphasizes the potential for moral agents to critically reassess and improve their moral beliefs and practices. Another component to the agent cultivation model is a relativized "ideal observer" who serves as a guiding morally exemplary figure who, within similar social and cognitive constraints, acts to best achieve the aims of a just moral responsibility system.[28] This "ideal observer" is not a transcendent or God-like figure who sets moral standards, rather one who provides a realistic aspirational

21 Vargas, "The Social Constitution of Agency," 9.
22 Vargas, "The Social Constitution of Agency," 10.
23 Vargas, "The Social Constitution of Agency," 17.
24 Vargas, "The Social Constitution of Agency," 18.
25 Vargas, "The Social Constitution of Agency," 18.
26 Vargas, "The Social Constitution of Agency," 12.
27 Vargas, "The Social Constitution of Agency," 17.
28 Vargas, "The Social Constitution of Agency," 14.

standard for agents to cultivate their actions and moral sensitivity. Using this ideal as a guide, individuals can reflect on their conduct and strive to improve, even while embedded in oppressive circumstances. The project of moral responsibility and the goal of praise and blame is to cultivate agency in individuals so they can appropriately respond to moral situations and develop their moral sensitivity.

One limitation of Vargas' model is that the ideal observer remains deeply influenced by their moral community, which is itself shaped by oppressive social structures. Even well-intentioned moral exemplars may unknowingly perpetuate systemic biases because they cannot transcend societal conditions. This poses a circularity problem in Vargas' framework. Complete escape from the influence of power, domination, and oppression is nearly impossible—even acts of resistance arise within these power dynamics.[29] However, oppression is always a factor, and moral reform necessarily occurs within an oppressive society. This is why including oppression within the bounds of morality and using oppression as a tool for moral consideration in hopes of improvement is a reconciliatory aspect of this social framework of moral responsibility. Actively considering ones and others' positionalities and access to agency within power dynamics when evaluating morality proves to be a helpful tool to evaluate the conditions of moral practices and systems.

It is important to also emphasize that the practicality of considering oppression should not be excessively leaned on as it could lead to the romanticization or glorification of conditions of oppression as a 'superpower' to mending social justice. Using experiences of the oppressed to tackle oppression gives responsibility to the oppressed to mend our moral systems rather than having the non-oppressed, powerful, and influential enact meaningful change to the moral systems themselves. While the non-oppressed should listen and understand the experiences of the oppressed and to provide more space to and uphold the voices of the oppressed, this is far from sufficient to make reparations to the moral system.

**Conclusion**

When assessing individual culpability within oppressive social contexts, it is crucial to recognize how systemic factors shape moral decision-making and opportunities for growth. Social conventions around morality and responsibility often fail to account for these influences. To account for autonomy within oppressive systems, Meyers provides an appealing account of episodic, narrowly programmatic, and partial access autonomy. Meyers' preservation of autonomy allows for the possibility of assigning moral responsibility to oppressed individuals. With Meyers' framework in mind, McKenna then argues that assigning moral accountability proceeds through engaging in social conversation with one's moral community. His conversational theory of moral responsibility falls short as an ameliorative method of moral systems because conversations can enact social biases and norms, undermining the narratives and experiences of marginalized people. Alternatively, Vargas offers a reformative account of moral cultivation that seeks to repair moral injustice beyond oppression. He incorporates oppression into a scalar model that holds individuals accountable while recognizing limitations imposed by social power imbalances.

Vargas' agent cultivation model and the concept of the ideal observer allow moral reform to emerge as an attainable, self-motivated project grounded in social reality. However, Vargas faces a difficult tension at the heart of non-ideal theories that also attempt to be normative. His reliance on relativized ideal observers risks importing the very conditions of

29 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (Pantheon Books, 1978), 96.



oppression which those observers are relativized against. My aim in this paper has not been to argue that non-ideal theories which qualify their accounts of autonomy by reference to actual mechanisms of oppression are doomed to fail. Rather, I have sought to show that such theories must consciously grapple with a circularity problem. To avoid abstraction that would overlook the specific conditions under which oppressed people exercise autonomy, these theories must give us relativized ideals. Yet in doing so, they make themselves especially vulnerable to the possibility that those ideals may unwittingly reproduce unnoticed conditions of oppression. As we have seen with all three thinkers, the possibility of falling into practices that perpetuate oppression is not completely avoidable. The task, then, is to continually revisit and scrutinize these ideals. Hence, Vargas's consciousness-raising project must itself remain critical of the ways in which it might be subject to the very forces it seeks to resist.

Though vulnerable to bias and wider structural influences, the ideal observer approach invites critical awareness and ongoing moral improvement. Centring oppression within this framework not only acknowledges experiences of oppression, but also challenges systemic injustices embedded in our moral systems, making it a promising path toward more equitable moral responsibility. These frameworks allow us to better approach the analysis of moral responsibility as illustrated in the examples of Barry and Maryam that open this paper. I have highlighted the complexity of a theory of moral responsibility that incorporates unequal distributions of power and its influence on individual agency in society and our moral communities. These considerations enrich discussions on morality as we hope to improve our societal conditions by developing wider and more thorough ideas of who and what is right or wrong.

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