

Better Together: Intersubjective Agency Expansion as Resistance¹

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Abstract: I develop a strategy of resisting oppression that is directed towards expanding the agency of other oppressed agents and is thus unhampered by some forms of internalized oppression. Using Simone de Beauvoir's argument that freedom is intersubjective, I motivate intersubjective agency expansion which holds that even if internalized oppression has compromised the ability to resist for one's own sake, oppressed agents can still marshal resistant agency on behalf of others. A secondary upshot of this strategy is that it may help repair some harms of internalized oppression. On this view, both resistance and repair are not solitary acts, but collective efforts. I first motivate the concept of ambiguous agency based on Beauvoir's discussion of ambiguity and Qrescent Mali Mason's concept of intersectional ambiguity. Specifically, I argue for the ambiguity between self-regarding and other-regarding forms of agency and hold that internalized oppression may harm the former but not necessarily the latter. I then develop the strategy of intersubjective agency expansion and its two forms: symbolic and direct agency expansion. Finally, I argue that a secondary upshot of this strategy is the repair of internalized oppression, and that this ought to count as a form of resistance to oppression.

I. Introduction

Oppression does not only harm people materially; it can also threaten a person's sense of their own agency. Feminists have catalogued various forms of internalized oppression including self-objectification, a constricted sense of agency, a conviction of inferiority, adopting oppressive adaptive preferences, and interference with the skills needed to be a self-determining agent (see Bartky 1990; Beauvoir 2011; Card 1996; Tessman 2005; Khader 2011, 2012; Meyers 2002, 2004). A feature of these harms is that they threaten, among other things, a sense of agency needed to lead a self-determined life (cf. Meyers 2002, 5). Oppression may impair both an accurate perception of one's agentic capacities and the abilities needed to enact that agency. For instance, self-objectification can occlude one's sense of agency so victims see themselves as

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powerless (Beauvoir 2011, 2018); internalized oppressive stereotypes can compete with an agent's desires and values, making it difficult to choose authentically (Bartky 1990). Among the harms of oppression, then, are threats to the abilities to conceive of oneself as an agent and direct one's life accordingly.

It is important to identify these harms to articulate the effects of oppression. Yet doing so also raises a question for accounts of resistance: if we show how oppression can be internalized, how do we also acknowledge the possibility of resistance in general, and specifically, resistance to internalized oppression itself? For instance, a sense of self-worth and empowerment could aid resistance in an oppressive environment (like a sexist classroom) by inspiring self-advocacy. Yet if one has, instead, an internalized sense of passivity, it will be that much harder to resist that instance of oppression *and* to challenge that passivity. It may seem that one must already be free of internalized oppression to resist it, for oppression may damage some of the capacities needed to resist internalized oppression itself: we cannot heal broken legs by walking on them. And this may lead to skepticism about repairing internalized oppression at all.

However, this skepticism rests on faulty assumptions. First, it assumes that agency is univocal: one's agency is *either* damaged by internalized oppression *or* liberated, and damaged agency interferes with resistance. But denying the plural nature of agency yields an oversimplified view that harmfully reduces agents to victims, as many feminists have argued (e.g. Narayan 2002, Lugones 2003, Meyers 2002). Rather, agents who are oppressed can exhibit both *oppressed agency* when they conform to oppressive norms or act on the oppressive desires or beliefs they have internalized as well as *resistant agency*, when they challenge or subvert oppression—including the oppression they've internalized. Further, an additional aspect of the oppressed/resistant dynamic is that the uses of both agencies can be alternatively self-directed

(e.g. failing to stand up for oneself) or other-directed (e.g. advocating for a friend). Thus, a person can exhibit both oppressed and resistant agencies along these different dimensions, for instance if they help a mentee challenge internalized stereotypes yet harbor self-objectifying beliefs. One of the ways agents who are oppressed are not ‘mere victims,’ then, is that they can stand up on behalf of others even if they struggle to do so for themselves. Internalized oppression is never the single dimension of a person’s agency, and this means there are other agentic resources available to repair it. The possibility of repairing internalized oppression will turn on the nuances of how different types of agencies are deployed and where they are directed.

A second faulty assumption is that challenging internalized oppression is an individual effort of will. At least since the second wave of feminism, the politics of personal transformation has asked how individual agents can overcome internalized oppression by, for instance, replacing sexist desires (Bartky 1990, chapter 4). While systemic changes to target the upstream causes of internalized oppression are crucial, feminists have also asked how we can liberate our *selves* in tandem. However, the feasibility of such projects has been called into doubt by these same feminists: “Those who claim that any woman can reprogram her consciousness if only she is sufficiently determined hold a shallow view of the nature of patriarchal oppression” (Bartky 1990, 57-58), not least because “[o]ne cannot simply will one’s character to change” (Tessman 2005, 23). This is why, for instance, it may be a better strategy to target adaptive preferences through systemic changes rather than individual desire modification (e.g. Nussbaum 2000). While I agree that the success of self-transformation driven by will is limited, it is a mistake to assume these efforts rest solely on the individual’s will in the first place. Of course we cannot will ourselves different by force, because this is not how we change: we are situated, relational agents who are only selves with and through others. The individual-level project of challenging

internalized oppression is not the problem; the failure to recognize the relationality of the project is. We can take up the project of challenging internalized oppression at the individual level—alongside systemic change—so long as we characterize it correctly as an intersubjective effort.

In this paper, I propose a strategy of resistant agency that is directed towards expanding the agency of other agents who are oppressed and is thus unhampered by certain harms from internalized oppression.² Using Simone de Beauvoir's argument that freedom is intersubjective, I motivate a strategy of *intersubjective agency expansion*, which recognizes that though harms from internalized oppression are real, agents can exhibit both oppressed and resistant agencies and offers nuance in how these agencies may be deployed: even if internalized oppression has compromised the ability to resist for one's own sake, agents who are oppressed can still marshal resistant agency on behalf of others. A secondary effect of this strategy is that it may help repair some harms of internalized oppression. And this means that both resistance and repair are not solitary acts, but collective efforts, and that ultimately, we must all work to empower each other.

In section two, I motivate the concept of ambiguous agency based on Beauvoir's discussion of ambiguity and Qrescent Mali Mason's concept of intersectional ambiguity. Specifically, I motivate the ambiguity between self-regarding and other-regarding forms of agency and argue that internalized oppression may harm the former but not necessarily the latter. In the third section, I develop the strategy of intersubjective agency expansion and its two forms: symbolic and direct agency expansion. Finally, in the last section I argue that a secondary upshot of this strategy is the repair of internalized oppression, and that this ought to count as a form of resistance.

² I'll use 'agents' or 'agents who are oppressed' throughout to refer to people who suffer under oppression, though I occasionally 'victims' when emphasizing this dimension of agency.

II. Ambiguous Agency

Though it is evident that oppressed agents do in fact exercise agency, there is a question of how to represent this in theory.³ Serene Khader identifies this challenge as the Agency Dilemma: “Feminists who theorize about oppression and deprivation are faced with a balancing act—that of trying to represent deprived people as agents without thereby obscuring the reality of their victimization” (2011, 30). Articulating the agency-undermining effects of oppression may leave little theoretical room to recognize victims’ agencies, yet a reluctance to represent victims of oppression as mere victims can come at the cost of recognizing internalized oppression. One way to navigate this dilemma is to distinguish different aspects of agency, for instance by “claiming that although oppression undermines autonomy of choices in many parts of our lives, it does not restrict *all* of our decisions” (Webster 2021, 105), thereby recognizing those with internalized oppression as “both agents and victims” (Khader 2011, 32).⁴ Below, I motivate another approach based on Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity that posits both *oppressed* and *resistant* agencies.⁵ This approach holds that because agency itself is plural, there is no tension in representing a person with internalized oppression as both victim and agent.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir argues for an ontology of ambiguity that is the basis for ethics (2018). Rather than reducing human experience to a single dimension (e.g. mind or body, individual or member of collective), as many Western philosophical approaches have tried,

³ I assume, for the sake of the paper, that victims of oppression can and do exercise their agency to resist oppression despite internalized oppression.

⁴ This is Khader’s own approach to the dilemma: she argues that adaptive preferences “affect people selectively rather than globally” (2011, 32). For instance, someone with adaptive preferences may have self-entitlements to certain social goods but not others (Khader 2011, 120).

⁵ Notably, this approach will not satisfy all theorists that may wonder if it can truly recognize the agency of victims. See Webster (2021) for a different approach to the dilemma. Instead of identifying different aspects of agency, some of which are unaffected by internalized oppression, Webster motivates a form of agency that is compatible with and can still be exercised despite internalized oppression.

Beauvoir argues that we should embrace the opposing dimensions of our experiences. Human existence is *ambiguous*:

He [sic] is still part of this world of which he is a consciousness. He asserts himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things... This privilege, which he alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with all his fellow-men. In turn an object for others, he is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends. (2018, 5-6)

Mason notes that “Beauvoir lists these seemingly oppositional situations of the human...to illustrate how these binaries are not experienced *as* binaries to the human. Rather, a human being exists within and between these states” (2018, 55). For instance, we experience ourselves as an internal consciousness yet are also embodied; we have the power of choice yet are also affected by the actions of others. Beauvoir argues that this reality is the basis for ethics: it is by embracing the condition of our ambiguity that we can “draw our strength to live and our reason for acting” (2018, 8).

Beauvoir’s discussion of ambiguity can help us think through uses of oppressed and resistant agencies. Mason motivates the concept of *intersectional ambiguity* using Beauvoir’s work to illuminate Black women’s experiences at the intersection of race and gender (2018, 2021). Because it captures the *both/and* nature of situated, embodied experiences, and because Black women must navigate systems of racism and patriarchy (Mason 2021, 711), intersectional ambiguity “names the particular type of ambiguity that Black women experience as simultaneously raced and gendered” (Mason 2018, 58). Intersectional ambiguity captures the ambiguous causes of harms under oppression (both racism and patriarchy) as well as the split political alliances Black women may experience, for instance (Mason 2021, 711). Just as it can capture experiences of intersectional oppression, so intersectional ambiguity can help explain the ambiguous nature of agency in these conditions, describing “how the cross-sections of identities

are experienced not merely as oppression but also as productive spaces that point us toward how we might resist and respond to our oppressions” (Mason 2018, 58). A person can exhibit both oppressed and resistant agencies when they uphold or challenge oppression, respectively, along different dimensions.

This duality of oppressed/resistant agency has been theorized in other ways. For instance, María Lugones argues that “A person may be both oppressed and resistant and act in accordance with both logics” (2003, 13), and this is why it is important to see “people who are oppressed as not consumed or exhausted by oppression, but also as resisting or sabotaging a system aimed at molding, reducing, violating, or erasing them” (12).⁶ Alisa Bierria develops a “heterogenous framework” of the multiple types of agencies that victims can exercise (2014, 137). This framework allows us to recognize as agentic those actions whose intentions are not “legible” in oppressive systems (Bierria 2014, 137). Bierria theorizes different forms of resistant agencies such as “transformative agency” that targets systemic oppression and “insurgent agency” that “destabilizes, circumnavigates, or manipulates” within systems of oppression (2018, 139). Recognizing different types of agencies allows us to deny “that oppression prevents disenfranchised agents from being fully agentic” (Bierria 2018, 137). And Diana Tietjens Meyers’ view of self-determination as the exercise of a set of agentic skills recognizes that these skills come in degrees and may vary over time and thus “acknowledges...the gravity of internalized oppression...which impede[s] women’s ability to develop and exercise these skills...[while] it also explains how women can recognize and resist subordination by marshaling their agentic skills” (2002, 21).

⁶ Mason (2018) also draws on Lugones’ oppressed $\leftrightarrow$ resisting logics.

Beauvoir, Mason, Lugones, Bierria, and Meyers each provide ways to understand the plural nature of agency under oppression that neither reduce victims to diminished agents nor ignore the effects of internalized oppression, thereby navigating the Agency Dilemma. I follow the framework of ambiguous agency in what follows, and suggest that it, similarly, offers an approach to the Agency Dilemma. Since ambiguous agency holds that the structure of agency is multiplicitous and tensile, both expressing resistance and reflecting internalized oppression (if in different ways), it can vindicate agency even as it recognizes harms to agency. So, the claims that victims of oppression *both* suffer internalized oppression *and* retain meaningful agency are compatible.⁷

Given my use of Beauvoir's arguments, it is worth pausing to address a criticism of her work. Beauvoir's racial and class privileges influenced her analysis of gender oppression by erasing the experiences of women of color. Kathryn T. Gines articulates the problem with Beauvoir's race/gender analogy in *The Second Sex* (2010, 42-43). Gines argues that this comparison "often codes race as black man and gender as white woman," leaving the intersectional oppression women of color face unnamed and unanalyzed (Gines 2010, 36; see also Gines 2014, Nya 2014, 466-467, and Nya 2019, 14, 21-22).⁸ Extending this point, Nathalie Nya argues that Beauvoir "used the condition of the colonized in order to further reflect on the

⁷ Recall the first faulty assumption discussed in the introduction: the Agency Dilemma may only arise on certain conceptions of agency as univocal (indeed, it would be mysterious how one can retain meaningful agency if *that agency* is undermined or damaged). A view of agency as ambiguous can address this dilemma since it can recognize that some exercises of agency can be distorted by oppression (e.g. when one believes oppressive norms) while others are not (e.g. when one acts to resist oppression or holds subversive beliefs).

⁸ Gines (2014) argues that Beauvoir's oversight is not isolated to her analogy of race and gender: Beauvoir routinely compares (white) women's oppression to other forms of oppression (racial oppression, antisemitism, colonialism, and classism, all assumed to be suffered by men) without analyzing the racial, religious, colonial, or class aspects of gender oppression or the gendered aspect of these other oppressions. At the same time, Beauvoir "privileges [white] women's oppression as a more unique and constitutive form of oppression" than these others (Gines 2014, 255). Beauvoir's error is one of method: she hyper-focuses on a specific dimension of situated experience (gender) without considering the varieties of such experiences.

condition of white women” (2014, 465). In addition to ignoring the situations of women of color in favor of white women and Black men, Beauvoir’s framing overlooks the ways that white women perpetuated colonial oppression in France since she associates colonial oppressors with men. Beauvoir thus ignores how, in addition to suffering gender oppression, “French women colonizers contributed to the stereotypes about black men,” for instance (Nya 2014, 466). I mention these worries here both to highlight Mason’s novel use of Beauvoir to analyze the very experiences Beauvoir neglects and to anticipate an objection in the following section in which it will become especially important to attend to intersectionality in ways Beauvoir did not.

With these concerns in mind, I propose that another ambiguity maps onto oppressed/resistant agency: agency under oppression is ambiguous in being both self-regarding and other-regarding. Roughly, this latter ambiguity captures what we feel, believe, and how we act towards ourselves as agents who are oppressed and what we feel, believe, and how we act towards other agents who are oppressed. It tracks concerns like the direction of our advocacy, our willingness to stand up for ourselves versus for another, how we view ourselves as compared to others, or what we do to help others instead of ourselves. I argue that agency under oppression can be *both* self- *and* other-regarding, and this ambiguity points towards a strategy of resistant agency.

An unsurprising feature of internalized oppression is that it mostly (though not exclusively) concerns how agents regard and treat themselves. Internalizing oppressive beliefs, norms, and stereotypes, a process Sandra Lee Bartky refers to as *psychological oppression* (1990, chapter 2), describes how agents direct oppressive treatment upon themselves. As Bartky explains: “To be psychologically oppressed is to be weighed down in your mind...The psychologically oppressed become their own oppressors; they come to exercise harsh dominion

over their own self-esteem” (1990, 22). Along with a sense of inferiority, agents who are oppressed may develop “a tendency to feel guilt or resignation instead of anger when...wronged, [and] a disposition of hopelessness...” (Tessman 2005, 37).⁹ Adaptive preferences may lead an agent to choose options that harm her own well-being (Khader 2011, 2012). And oppressive narratives may impede some of the skills needed to live a self-determined life, as when, for instance, inundation with images of “romanticized” motherhood and the reduction of supported procreative options “removes motherhood from the realm of choices and preempts exercising agentic skills” (2002, 35). Such agentic impairments can mean a person “live[s] someone else’s version of” their life (Meyers 2002, 17).

In addition to hampering agentic skills, internalized oppression can impact one’s *sense* of agency. Consider Beauvoir’s analysis of woman as Other. As the inessential to the defining man’s dominant influence, women may find themselves with stymied avenues for exercising freedom. Beauvoir writes:

...what singularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness. Woman’s drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential. (2011, 17).

According to Beauvoir, oppressors reject the reality of ambiguity in its victims: they are denied subjectivity and reduced to objectivity. In turn, instead of seeing themselves as subjects that can direct their own lives, women may come to see themselves as objects who needn’t choose for themselves.¹⁰ Of course, oppression limits material options regardless of how a person perceives

⁹ Tessman is working from a virtue ethics rather than phenomenological framework (as Bartky is); she defines moral damage as traits that interfere with flourishing (2005, 37).

¹⁰ Beauvoir adds that women may be complicit in this denial of their subjectivity since:

their agency, but my focus here is on the additional psychological dimension of oppression. If victims have trouble conceiving of themselves as capable of shaping their own lives, it will be that much harder to counteract material restrictions.

Some effects of internalized oppression can be directed towards others. For instance, Tessman (2005, 37) and Card (1995 [1990], 80) suggest that women may become deceitful or manipulative to navigate their situations. And internalized stereotypes about one's social group can be directed onto fellow victims, obscuring systems of oppression. But we can distinguish other-regarding damage like this from the ways that agents may negatively think of themselves (as inferior and blameworthy for their suffering), treat themselves (as undeserving of justice, love, or respect) and regard themselves (as ineffective) because of internalized oppression. I don't mean to suggest that all agents who are oppressed only ever have negative self-regard. As always, the reality is more complicated since agents can hold pride, a sense of capability, and self-worth alongside more damaged psychological aspects (again highlighting our ambiguity). Further, feminists have argued that Black women and other women of color are often quite aware of the oppression they face—especially the material effects—and the agency they retain in the face of it (e.g. hooks 2014, 11; Collins 1991). For instance, Patricia Hill Collins discusses the knowledge that Black women possess at the intersections of gender, race, and class and the ways they authentically define themselves despite this oppression (2011). This is not to say Black

...she eludes the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help. Indeed, beside every individual's claim to assert himself as subject—an ethical claim—lies the temptation to flee freedom and to make himself a thing: it is a pernicious path because the individual, passive, alienated, and lost, is prey to a foreign will, cut off from his transcendence, robbed of all worth. But it is an easy path: the anguish and stress of authentically assumed existence are thus avoided. The man who sets the woman up as an *Other* will thus find in her a deep complicity. (2011, 10)

That victims may become complicit in their own oppression speaks to the great existential burden of being a self-authoring agent in this world (cf. Knowles 2019). It also tells us that the very enactments of agency—including “inventing one's goals” and taking responsibility for them—are among what oppressive forces aim to undermine in victims. However, see Nya (2019) and Gines (2014) for criticisms about Beauvoir's appeal to (white) women's complicity as the unique differentiating factor of gender oppression as compared to other forms of oppression.

women and other women of color are impervious to the effects of internalized oppression, but rather to acknowledge that Beauvoir and others are presuming certain privileges that may make one's oppression harder to discern and passivity more likely. Internalized oppression may not be as common or severe for agents who don't have the luxury of being passive or whose situations necessitate early awareness of their oppression, especially for those at the intersections of multiple oppressions.

Even though not all agents have internalized oppression, the ambiguity between self-regarding and other-regard agency can be present for some: internalized oppression may lead to damaging self-regarding effects but not necessarily damaging other-regarding effects. The abilities to empathize with, encourage, and assist others need not be damaged as a result of internalized oppression, and these traits may even be pronounced in some victims.¹¹ Agents who may be unwilling to resist on their own behalf may be quite able and willing to resist on the behalf of other victims, even those similarly situated. For instance, a girl may internalize hatred for her feminine body but celebrate other girls' femininity (we are not always consistent even about internalized stereotypes and may think we are the only ones failing to live up to the norms of our social groups while other members are exemplars; the misogynistic encouragement of feminine insecurity and competition among women may exacerbate this tendency). Or an agent may recognize the oppressive systems at play in the situations of victims who are unlike her along some dimension of identity (e.g. members of a different class) yet fail to see the forces of oppression in her own case. Sometimes it may be easier to see the worth, capabilities, and value of others than in oneself.¹² One may admire or care for fellow victims while denying that they,

¹¹ Cf. Tessman on the burdened virtue of sensitivity to suffering (2005, chapter 4).

¹² As a comparison, think of how easy it can be to build up our friends—to see their worth, to feel compassion for them, to release them from blame—and how hard it can be to do these things for ourselves. Indeed, some popular

themselves, are worthy of the same treatment. In short, since one ambiguity of agency under oppression concerns both the ways we treat ourselves qua victims and the ways we treat others qua victims, this is yet another possible way that agents can express the oppressed/resistant ambiguity: self-regarding agency may follow the “logic” of oppression, while other-regarding agency may follow the “logic” of resistance.

To recap: one ambiguity of agency under oppression concerns self-regarding and other-regarding aspects; damage from internalized oppression may be mostly self- but not necessarily other-regarding. Thus, self-regarding/other-regarding agency can map onto oppressed/resistant agency, suggesting one may sometimes be better able to resist on behalf of others than on behalf of themselves.

Recall the apparent puzzle of agency under oppression: internalized oppression can stymie in its victims the very capacities needed to resist, and especially to repair internalized oppression. But the self-regarding/other-regarding ambiguity can inform a strategy of resistant agency that avoids this purported stalemate. This strategy looks outside oneself towards expanding the agency of other victims since this other-regarding exercise of agency may be unimpeded by self-regarding internalized oppression. Thus, it offers a path towards repairing internalized oppression even while suffering from it: even if they don’t recognize themselves as fully agentic, agents may be able and willing to wield their agency on behalf of others. It is this mechanism of exercising agency “outside-in,” towards others before oneself, that can offer a way around the self-regarding agency-undermining effects of internalized oppression toward repair, I will argue. However, this analysis also applies to individuals and groups that do not suffer internalized oppression since the expansion of others’ agency can engender collective

discussions of self-compassion suggest that we should treat ourselves as we treat our close friends *because* these other-directed efforts are often easier than their self-directed variations (Neff 2011).

empowerment even absent damaged agency. In the next section, I will motivate this resistant strategy of bolstering collective agency using Beauvoir's discussion of freedom.

III. Intersubjective Agency Expansion

Beauvoir rejects the charge that existentialism is ethically egoistic by unpacking the logic of freedom. The individual who assumes their ambiguous agency takes up the burden of having “his [sic] acts weigh upon the earth as much as those of other men” (Beauvoir 2018, 42); of making choices and committing to projects even at the risk of making mistakes and being criticized. But for these efforts to have any weight, one must recognize not only that one is responsible for them—and thus responsible to others—but also that what comes about from one's freedom can only be validated through our commitment to it and its recognition by others. Freedom cannot be exercised in a vacuum filled only with objects, for there would be no real responsibility to others, and thus no real freedom. Rather, freedom can only be exercised in a world where others can recognize one's projects and freely choose to endorse them or not.¹³ Choices are made in a world that is already filled with the projects and meanings freely created by others, and we rely on the actions of those that have come before us to inform our own actions. We need others—free others—to authentically be free ourselves.

On the free person, Beauvoir writes:

He [sic] can become conscious of the real requirements of his own freedom, which can will itself only by destining itself to an open future, by seeking to extend itself by means of the freedom of others. Therefore...the freedom of other men must be respected and *they must be helped to free themselves...* (2018, 65, emphasis added)

¹³ As one of my students noted, the alternative is like buying social media followers: if followers didn't freely choose to subscribe, their support is meaningless.

The ontological structure of freedom is intersubjective. It is built upon and relies on the existence of others who are exercising their freedom. Additionally, one's ends must involve the promotion of others' freedom: "To will oneself free is also to will others free" (Beauvoir 2018, 78). There is a necessary reciprocity in the exercise of *authentic* freedom; as will be discussed below, though one could act in many ways, only those expressions of agency that respect and promote the freedom of others are authentic.

Beauvoir is leading the charge against ethical egoism by providing an ontological and ethical argument for the promotion of others' freedom. But consider again the self-regarding/other-regarding aspect of ambiguity. Some agents who are oppressed may recognize and respect the freedom, agency, and worth of others and yet struggle to acknowledge these qualities in themselves. Egoism is not the threat in these cases; self-denial is. This suggests that even when burdened under the self-regarding harms of internalized oppression, these agents may still be able to meet Beauvoir's challenge to 'help others free themselves,' to expand the agency of other victims even when their own sense of agency is hampered (and agents who do not suffer internalized oppression are of course also capable of this). Beauvoir's formula can provide the theoretical basis for a strategy of *intersubjective agency expansion*—a form of resisting oppression that bolsters collective agencies.¹⁴ This strategy entails looking outward, beyond one's own self and any possible agentive limitations to help other victims *recognize, exercise, and expand their agencies*. I suggest two forms of this strategy: symbolic agency expansion and direct agency expansion. The upshot is that agency expansion can help other agents recognize their own agentive capabilities and create structures to expand their agency.¹⁵

¹⁴ I use 'collective' to connote 'aggregate' here, not a single collective agency.

¹⁵ Meyers (2002) gives an account of developing agentive skills as a way of repairing internalized oppression. I discuss the differences between our views in the following section.

Consider symbolic agency expansion. How can agents who are oppressed help each other recognize, exercise, and expand their agencies? One part of this strategy involves helping others see themselves as robust agents. Recall that internalized oppression can lead to a view of oneself as an ineffective agent. Symbolic agency expansion is a way to help others challenge and correct this view of themselves, whether through encouragement, modeling, or representation. Though it may not create more literal material options, symbolic agency expansion presents *possibilities* for others; it transforms into live options ways of thinking and being that may have previously been out of reach.

Collins' discussion of the ideological dimension of oppression offers an example of symbolic agency expansion. Collins identifies "controlling images of Black womanhood" created and maintained by dominant systems of power (1991, 67). These stereotypes (such as the "mammy" or "welfare mother") serve to naturalize and justify oppression (Collins 1991, 68). They also try to define Black women according to oppressive images and undermine Black women's abilities to self-define (Collins 1991, 67-68). In her discussion of Black women reclaiming their power to self-define, Collins identifies the important role of other Black women as models. On her decision to pursue her Ph.D., she recalls:

In 1978 I offered a seminar as part of a national summer institute for teachers and other school personnel. After my Chicago workshop, an older Black woman participant whispered to me, "Honey, I'm real proud of you. Some folks don't want to see you up there [in the front of the classroom] but you belong there. Go back to school and get your Ph.D. and then they won't be able to tell you nothing!" (Collins 1991, 97-98)

This was a powerful affirmation of Collins' own potential in part because it came from someone who shares what Collins calls the "outsider within" position of Black women (1991, 11). Collins' story speaks to the importance of other people in motivating agents to reclaim their own agencies. But this effect need not always be so direct; think too of the Black women students in

Collins' classes. In occupying a position often reserved for white men, Collins' students may recognize that what is a reality for her represents a possibility for them. Modeling agentic possibilities for others is a way to resisting controlling messages of what agents who are oppressed can and cannot become.¹⁶

Another example of symbolic agency expansion comes from social media. Mason argues that the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic is a form of “resistant imaginary” for Black women situated at the intersectional ambiguity of Blackness and womanness (2021, 701). The #BlackGirlMagic hashtag allows Black women to share stories of their own surviving and thriving despite and through the multiplicative oppressive struggles they face—a resilient use of agency that can seem like ‘magic.’ These empowering stories shared by and for Black women counter the dominant messages and controlling images that oppress them (Mason 2021, 712).

Simultaneously, they are ways of signaling to others within their communities what is possible: “‘This is how I got over. This is how you, too, might’” (Mason 2021, 715). Mason calls this the “visionary function” of #BlackGirlMagic since “it encourages Black girls and women to reexamine their self-perceptions,” opening up “new possibilities for liberation” (2021, 715). I add that #BlackGirlMagic is a form of symbolic agency expansion since, as a way Black women “assert their agency” against agency-denying narratives, it is a form of agency-expansion *and* offers a model for other Black women to recognize and express their own agency (Mason 2021, 714). Mason sums up this point: “Since internalization of stereotypes can affect agency and understanding of potential for agency, this kind of counterdiscourse also provides individual and collective motivation” (2021, 715). It is one way of encouraging others to recognize their own agentic possibilities while marshalling one’s own.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre’s suggestion that the ethical dimension of our choices resides in the fact that once we make them, they become possibilities for others, is relevant here too (1946).

While symbolic agency expansion can help others correct internalized messages that deny agency, direct agency expansion is a straightforward augmentation of options. Mirroring Beauvoir's argument that we need others to express our freedom, Susan Brison writes of the necessity of other people in exercising her will after an assault:

In the year after my assault, when I was terrified to walk alone, I was able to go to talks and other events on campus by having a friend walk with me. I became able to use the locker room in the gym after getting the university to put a lock on a door that led to a dark, isolated passageway, and I was able to park my car at night after lobbying the university to put a light in the parking lot." (2002, 60-61)

Agentive capacities can be depleted by trauma as well as by oppression, but others can help prop up and extend that agency when one cannot do so alone. Direct agency expansion creates more options for agents, whether at an intersubjective scale (as with Brison's regained ability to go to talks or the gym) or through broader political efforts. An example of the latter is the various efforts to protest the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the U.S. and secure state-based reproductive rights via referendums. To fight for one's own right to reproductive healthcare is also to fight for others' rights for the same (and vice versa), which involves protecting and expanding others' agencies via their ability to choose what to do with their bodies. These campaigns are directed at securing specific material options and underlined by a demand to protect and expand exercises of agency.

Practices of mutual aid also provide models for direct agency expansion. According to Dean Spade, mutual aid projects "directly meet people's survival needs" through community efforts rather than relying on systems that are either ineffective at meeting these needs or collusive in creating them (2020, 7). Spade cites the Black Panther Party as a paradigm of mutual aid:

Mutual aid projects expose the reality that people do not have what they need and propose that we can address this injustice together. The most famous example in the

United States is the Black Panther Party's survival programs which ran throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including a free breakfast program, free ambulance program, free medical clinics, a service offering rides to elderly people doing errands, and a school aimed at providing rigorous liberation curriculum to children. (2020, 9).

By 'addressing injustice together,' participants in mutual aid projects actively create community structures to meet the basic needs that are unfulfilled by unjust systems. This is a way of "solving problems through collective action" (Spade 2020, 16).

While framed in terms of meeting basic survival needs, mutual aid can also be understood as a model for direct agency expansion. The Black Panther Party's efforts, for instance, did not only meet essential needs for their communities. They also created conditions in which community members could exercise their agency more easily (think of being able to leave the house and run errands, or the necessity of a good meal to make any decision effectively, or of the liberatory power of education). The central idea here is that when agents themselves collectively build necessary structures in communities, they are creating the means by which everyone can have more options and live self-directed lives.¹⁷

As Spade puts it, mutual aid "values self-determination for people impacted or targeted by harmful social conditions" (2020, 62). This translates into direct material support. For instance, a local mutual aid network's website lists among their volunteer services neighbors that can "give you a ride; help with simple repairs; help you move" (Grand Rapids Area Mutual Aid Network 2020, How To) and that "direct cash giving is most effective," for instance with rent payment (Principles of Mutual Aid). By offering direct, material support as well as structures that facilitate it, mutual aid can serve as a way of resisting unjust systems by working to expand intersubjective agency.

¹⁷ This model also emphasizes that expanding agency is not merely a matter of expanding negative agency, but of building structures that support positive expressions of agency.

So far, I have argued for a strategy of resistant agency based on Beauvoir's argument that exercising freedom is a necessarily intersubjective practice. This strategy entails expanding the agency of other victims symbolically or directly. However, one may object that working to expand agency is a rather weak form of resistance. We exercise our agency in trivial or harmful ways all the time; does *any* expansion of agency count as resistant? Some distinction is needed to identify resistant forms of agency.

Consider again Beauvoir's description of oppression. Identifying the serious person, who takes values and meanings as predetermined, she writes: "The less economic and social circumstances allow an individual to act upon the world, the more this world appears to him [sic] as given. This is the case of women who inherit a long tradition of submission..." (Beauvoir 2018, 51). This is why, Beauvoir claims, woman's situation is analogous to the child's: she lives in a world that is determined for her so that there is no perceived room for the assertion of her will. On freedom in this situation, Beauvoir writes, "Like the child, [one] can exercise their freedom, but only within this universe which has been set up before them, without them." (2018, 37). This reinforces agents' objectivity, for they are not treated as responsible agents who create themselves and contribute to shared meaning.

But this description also points a way towards resistance. A common concern with theories of resisting oppression is that they are too demanding on already burdened victims. Because victims do not cause their oppression and are the ones that suffer under it, objectors hold that it is insensitive to extend a moral imperative to victims who are trying to survive the very forces they are charged to resist (Smith 2020; cf. Superson 1993). While this concern comes from a place of compassion, it risks entrenching the treatment of agents as relatively powerless—

a view that comports with oppressive narratives and denies ambiguous oppressed/resistant agency. Instead, Beauvoir treats women as agents when she writes:

...the child's situation is imposed upon him, whereas the [Western] women...chooses it or at least consents to it...[African women and harem slaves] have no instrument, be it in thought or by astonishment or anger, which permits them to attack the civilization which oppresses them. Their behavior is defined and can be judged only within this given situation, and it is possible that in this situation, limited like every human situation, they realize a perfect assertion of their freedom. But once there appears a possibility of liberation, it is resignation of freedom not to exploit that possibility, a resignation which implies dishonesty and which is a positive fault. (2018, 41)

Nya (2019) notes that Beauvoir grounds the possibility of resistance in knowledge of one's situation as oppressive as well as the extent of one's material restrictions; she also notes that Beauvoir incorrectly assumes that "African women or harem slaves" are less likely to obtain this knowledge and are thus farther from freedom than Western women (39).¹⁸ Rather, as discussed above, women of color may be well aware of their agentive capacities under oppression. However, Nya goes on to argue that Beauvoir is skeptical about Western women's "sense of moral freedom—whether they have the capacity for freedom, choice, and responsibility" (hence the analogy of women to children) (2019, 39). This culminates in a "de-habilitating standpoint from which women could do very little about their individual situation" (Nya 2019, 40).

While I am sympathetic to Nya's criticism—particularly Beauvoir's problematic assumptions about women of color—another reading of this passage can motivate two substantially different forms of resistant agency: though a narrow sort of freedom can be exercised even within significant restrictions (akin to Bierria's insurgent agency), when the possibility to act against those restrictions exists, failure to exercise one's agency in that way is a moral failure. It is perhaps understandable but it nonetheless contributes to a system that seeks to

¹⁸ This is another place where Beauvoir problematically compares gender oppression to slavery; see Giles (2014).

strip one of the exercise and full recognition of one's agency; it is a form of complicity in oppression. And since restricting agency in these ways is both a mechanism and effect of oppression, this means *reclaiming* one's agency—and helping others do so—is one way to meaningfully resist that oppression.

I suggest that Beauvoir offers a distinction between realizing one's freedom within oppressive constraints and the bad faith choice to avoid resisting those constraints. That there is a contrast between narrow and robust agency suggests that there are different qualities of resistant agency that bear on its authenticity. The human condition is that of freedom, but this is not sufficient for enacting authentic agency. We cannot avoid making choices, and though we are generally responsible for them, we can pretend we are not. If we tell ourselves we acted “out of human nature” or “because it is in my DNA,” we can try to evade the weight of our choices (even if, existentially, we do not succeed) (cf. Gordon 1999). Thus, the quality of our choices can be more or less authentic depending on the attitude in which they are made.¹⁹ I suggest that intersubjective agency expansion concerns *authentic* exercises of agency, which will limit what sorts of actions can count as resistant.

Suppose a woman chooses to enter a female-dominated career because she has internalized the message that she is ill-suited for anything else. Yes, this is a choice and an exercise of agency, but it is akin to a choice by Beauvoir's serious person who seeks to conform to pre-given societal values to avoid real self-determination. That choice, while a real choice, does not resist anything. Compare this case to that of a woman who chooses that same career out of a sense of self-determination—she knows she can succeed in other fields, but this one aligns

¹⁹ This is part of what Beauvoir illustrates in outlining different characteristic responses to the crisis of adolescence—the sub-person is qualitatively different from the free person (for instance) in part because of the attitudes they take toward their own agency and the way they do (and do not) express that agency.

with her values and commitments. And perhaps she recognizes that her field's gender distribution is no accident, but decides to challenge this by, say, taking pride in it or working to improve labor conditions in that field. This is a different way of exercising of agency than the former case, I contend, as this choice is made from a place of self-determination and responsibility. Choices that refuse to comply with a socially determined path are themselves contesting a feature of oppression and thus count as resistant agency.

The authenticity of our choices also depends on our respect for others' agencies. Beauvoir argues that oppression is characterized by oppressors denying the freedom of the oppressed. This is the "dishonest" act of the oppressor: in denying victims' freedom, they curtail their own on pain of the "contradiction" of freedom (Beauvoir 2018, 97). But if that is right, the same must be true of efforts to resist: resistance must *expand* agency (or at least respect it), for oneself and others; acts that restrict or deny agency, though themselves expressions of narrow agency, are nonetheless oppressive. For instance, women who exercise support anti-abortion efforts are literally shutting down others'—and their own—possible exercises of agency. Yes, they are technically making a committed choice and may even take responsibility for it. But because this choice works to forestall agency expression and fails to recognize (certain) others as full agents, it takes on an inauthentic character.²⁰ This means this sort of expression of agency cannot count as intersubjective agency expansion nor resistant agency.²¹

A more serious objection holds that intersubjective agency expansion has the potential to

²⁰ Note that I am not here giving conditions of *ethical* resistance but rather articulating an authenticity constraint on resistance (where authenticity is assumed to be an ethically neutral concept). I do not take on Beauvoir's commitment that ethics can be built up solely from this authenticity consideration and hold that delimiting the morally right and wrong ways to resist is an additional issue that would require further argumentation.

²¹ The same would be true of choices that seek to restrict or fail to respect one's own agency, such as a choice to financially rely solely on one's partner (when that is a choice to be made), for the same reasons.

reinforce oppressive structures and harm especially marginalized agents. The preceding consideration address this objection to a point—insofar as they deny the authentic agency of others, agents with privileges are not authentically exercising intersubjective agency. But this objection runs deeper, acknowledging the intersectional nature of oppression and the fact that some forms of oppression may be exacerbated in the service of others’ agency expansion. Simply put, the empowerment of some (more privileged) agents can disempower other (more vulnerable) agents. We have seen evidence of this throughout history, from the classism and racism of second-wave feminists encouraging white, middle-class housewives to gain financial independence by relying on the labor of women of color (hooks 2014, chapter 1), to carceral feminists’ efforts to criminalize domestic violence that reinforced the prison industrial complex that disproportionately harms people of color (Kim 2018), to contemporary #GirlBoss ‘empowerment’ that may run on exploited labor, especially from women of the Global South. If *all* we focus on is agency expansion, it seems, paradoxically, we also risk disempowering some.

Recall that Beauvoir overlooked the intersectional nature of oppression, describing freedom along a single ontological dimension. However, an emphasis on the intersubjective nature of freedom at the heart of Beauvoir’s argument along with an intersectional analysis may offer a corrective. We need to take seriously the claim that the freedom of one is inextricably bound up with the freedom of all and recognize how multiple systems of oppression work together to shape those freedoms. These requirements should force us to think about how our exercises of agency will impact the more marginalized and about structures that can support the agencies of the many different people who suffer under oppression. For example, Spade suggests that we think of mutual aid as bringing together multiple groups across shared issues: “Mutual aid projects, by creating spaces where people come together on the basis of some shared need or

concern in spite of their different lived experiences, cultivate solidarity” (2020, 15). This is one tactic to help prevent efforts of agency expansion from becoming exploitative: asking, how does this issue impact people from different social identities? What are the different vulnerabilities that may arise for different agents? What are the privileges we should be wary of? And how can we use this knowledge to create a system that expands the agency of all involved, not just some?

A related worry concerns who should take responsibility for efforts of intersubjective agency expansion. Beauvoir argues that the structure of ontological freedom entails the responsibility of each to promote the freedom of all (2018, 65), but the reality is more complicated. A familiar conflict may arise: either the most marginalized bear the burden of enacting this change, or more privileged agents direct these efforts for them, without them. Given that the point of intersubjective agency expansion is to collectively empower those who suffer under oppression, they should be at the center of these efforts.²² But again, I appeal to ambiguity: *both* the more privileged *and* the more vulnerable should be part of collective empowerment, even if their roles are not identical; Beauvoir’s argument that each of us is responsible for others suggests as much. Further, creating structures that support agency and sharing efforts of agentive exercises should ultimately make agency expression *less* burdensome for all.

Still, there is a practical question about whether agents with more relative privileges should helm resistance efforts (thereby releasing the more marginalized from this burden) or step aside from leadership (to avoid the risk of disenfranchising others). I do not pretend to have the answer to this complicated issue and suspect the answers will depend on several factors. But one

²² Spade contrasts mutual aid with charity, in which rich elites or governments determine who should be helped and how along with “what strings are attached” to that aid (2020, 22). In addition to ignoring the structural forces that create the need for aid, charity approaches reinforce hierarchies and gatekeep the recipients of aid. Similar problems would likely arise if privileged parties took charge of agency-enhancing efforts.

approach attends to the intersectional concerns discussed above. For instance, a local mutual aid group is intentionally run by a group of People of Color (Grand Rapids Area Mutual Aid Network 2020, The Giving Circle). This leadership includes decisions about how to disperse funds. Their website states: “Though there are white facilitators [of the group], they are there solely as non-voting members. In order to disrupt systems of white supremacy, we do not want white folks making decisions about mutual aid money meant for the most marginalized” (Grand Rapids Area Mutual Aid Network 2020, The Giving Circle). An approach like this seems to take care not to exploit some for the sake of empowering others.²³ And though it does create added burdens to the leadership involved, again, the overall goal of these efforts is the promotion of collective agency in which all face fewer burdens.

IV. Repair as Resistance

I’ve motivated a strategy of resistant agency based on Beauvoir’s arguments about ambiguity and freedom: even if burdened under the self-regarding harms of internalized oppression, agents can support and expand the agency of others. The central upshot of this strategy is expanding intersubjective agency through symbolic or direct means. In this section, I argue for a secondary upshot: this strategy can help repair some self-regarding aspects of internalized oppression when it is present.²⁴ To will oneself free is to will others free, but the converse of Beauvoir’s claim is worth exploring: willing others free may also help will oneself free. Further, I will argue that repairing internalized oppression should count as resistance.

²³ One may object that the white facilitators’ agency is being restricted by being disallowed from voting. However, the reasons for agency restrictions matter: as Beauvoir argues, “A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied...I am oppressed if I am thrown into prison, but not if I am kept from throwing my neighbor into prison” (2018, 97). Restricting agency that could be used oppress others is a permissible restriction of agency on Beauvoir’s view since the latter is not an authentic expression of agency.

²⁴ Since repair of internalized oppression is only a possible secondary feature of intersubjective agency expansion, the strategy is still relevant for those who do not suffer internalized oppression.

The following argument builds on Meyers' skill-based account of self-determination (2002, 2004). For Meyers, agentic skills like introspection, imagination, and communication engender autonomy by allowing agents to "improvise ways to express their *own* values and goals" (2002, 19) and are necessary for the "capacity to interpret and to autonomously enact or resist subordinating norms" (32). Since internalized oppression (especially the stock images and narratives of womanhood that Meyers considers) can weaken the development of these skills, thereby threatening self-determination, the exercise of agentic skills can help "repair this damage and increase...self determination" (Meyers 2002, 25). I will also argue that the exercise and expansion of agency can help repair internalized oppression, however my argument fills in some missing details of Meyers' view. For instance, while Meyers is right to connect the exercise of agentic skills with repair of internalized oppression, she does not give an account of repair *given* damage sustained to these very skills. While she notes that these agentic skills must be taught and practiced from childhood (2002, 55-56), this does not tell us how to expand the skills that have atrophied under oppression. Additionally, while Meyers rightly acknowledges the relational nature of agentic skills (2002, 22) and lists some interpersonal contexts in which they may expanded (e.g. friendships), she does not develop these points. Instead, Meyers focuses on individual instances of agentic exercise (and sometimes sounds as if these capacities are unimpaired, for instance, a "lyrical transformation" of the concept of motherhood through art, 2002, 53), as well as structural changes needed to foster agentic skills (e.g. 2002, 55-57). My argument develops both points that Meyers mentions only in passing, explaining how we can repair internalized oppression while suffering from it by drawing on the self-/other-regarding distinction and exploring the mechanism behind agency expansion in intersubjective contexts.

Recall the possible self-regarding effects of internalized oppression. The perception of oneself as an agent can be curtailed, restricting exercises of agency. But efforts to symbolically or directly expand the agency of others can also bolster one's own sense of agency and its expression—even if one's own sense of agency is hampered. This is a bootstrapping feature of intersubjective agency expansion: while we help others expand their agency, we may also indirectly do the same for ourselves. Turning outward, towards others, may help us, too.

How can other-regarding efforts of intersubjective agency expansion function as a bootstrap to repair internalized oppression for those who suffer it? Consider a parallel: the platitude “you can't love someone until you love yourself” overlooks the reality that sometimes we need to practice loving others (and be loved by others) to love ourselves. Similarly, rather than trying to independently ‘fix’ internalized oppression, a more effective strategy acknowledges the intersubjective nature of repair. For instance, as discussed above, some agents may empathize with other victims more than themselves, but this can eventually increase self-directed empathy. Brison's discussion of healing after experiencing trauma illustrates this possibility. She writes: “An interesting result of group therapy with trauma survivors is that they come to have greater compassion for their earlier selves by empathizing with others who experienced similar traumas. They stop blaming themselves by realizing that others who acted or reacted similarly are not blameworthy” (Brison 2002, 63). By feeling emotions they had denied themselves on others' behalf, victims can come to recognize that what is true of another may be true of themselves too.

Similarly, helping others recognize and exercise their agency can work “outside-in” to help one recognize and exercise their own agency, even if this is not their goal—indeed, even if one is resistant to recognizing their own agency. This is because helping others in this way is an

exercise of agency that isn't burdened with entrenched messages of inferiority, passivity, and self-objectification, yet is still an exercise of agency. It is therefore a way to strengthen the capacities needed to exercise agency on one's own behalf; the skills or capacities of agency are still being practiced, even if they are directed outward. For instance, when we help students articulate their political voices, we are also using our own. When we help a friend report a sexual harassment incident, we are also acting as a source of empowerment and resistance. To again evoke Meyers' view, helping someone imagine their own agentive possibilities is also a practice of our own agentive skills of imagination, communication, and interpersonal competence; helping others resist stretches our skills of volition and reasoning (2002, 20).²⁵

Another example concerns, once again, mutual aid projects. A feature of mutual aid is that liberatory structures benefit everyone—including the builders. Spade notes:

Mutual aid projects help people develop skills for collaboration, participation, and decision-making. For example, people engaged in a project to help one another through housing court proceedings will learn...about meeting facilitation, working across differences, retaining volunteers, addressing conflict, giving and receiving feedback, following through, and coordinating schedules and transportation. They may also learn that it is not just lawyers who can do this kind of work, and that many people—including themselves!—have something to offer. (2020, 16)

Building agency-enhancing structures can result in developing agency-enhancing skills. Note too the tone of empowerment—one *does* 'have something to offer' and it can be realized by teaching others the same. This is also a straight-forward example of how helping others exercise agency

²⁵ There is still a question of the mechanism by which other-directed exercises of agency come to bear on self-directed agency: how exactly does helping others expand their agencies help us expand our own, especially if we are resistant to recognizing our own agency? While a full exploration of this question would exceed the space limits of this paper, a start at an answer appeals to a dialogic process by which intersubjective agency expansion can come about. When we help others in the ways described, we are in discussion with each other: we talk through problems, try out new ideas, challenge suggestions and offer alternatives. I suggest it is this multi-layered and diachronic process of dialogue that can help one recognize and expand their agency in the course of helping others do the same since it engenders reflection on one's own situation and entails support from others to recognize their own agency. In short, what we do to help support the agency of others we receive back when it occurs in the context of a relationship.

can aid in developing agentic skills like communication, reasoning skills, and interpersonal skills needed for one's own self-determination (Meyers 2002, 20).

One may worry that I am suggesting that we treat others as instruments by helping them merely for the sake of expanding our own agency. But notice that this motivation would be antithetical to the project of intersubjective agency expansion. Beauvoir's ethics would criticize it precisely because regarding others as mere objects for one's own projects cannot be an authentic exercise of agency. Instead, I am identifying a possible secondary upshot of intersubjective agency expansion, not suggesting that we should engage in it to benefit ourselves. Further, the objection belies the point of the bootstrapping function, which is that it may help one come to recognize and exercise their own agency when they have trouble doing so, which is hardly sounds like a motivation for exploiting others.

I've argued that intersubjective agency expansion can have individual agency-expanding effects. In the remainder of this section, I will argue that we should understand these efforts of recognizing and exercising agency (whether directed towards others or rebounding upon oneself) as ways of repairing harms from internalized oppression and therefore as meaningful forms of resistance. Call this *reparative resistance*: resistance characterized by the repair of damage caused by internalized oppression, specifically, recognizing and exercising the agency that is denied by oppression.

Why frame this resistance in terms of *repair*? The imagery of repair indicates that harms have been committed and (imperfect) restoration is possible. Systems and individual oppressors are responsible for these harms, yet agents have power to respond in agency-affirming ways.²⁶

²⁶ This is similar to Card's point that oppression is the true cause of moral damages to character but victims can also take responsibility for their damaged characters (1996, chapter 2). We can identify these damages without blaming victims for them (cf. Wendell 1990).

According to Margaret Urban Walker, “moral repair is the task of restoring or stabilizing—and in some cases creating—the basic elements that sustain human beings in a recognizably moral relationship” (2006, 23). This relationship is based on “normative expectations,” the basic expectations on ourselves and others that we will meet the demands of shared normative standards (Walker 2006, 24). Moral wrongs betray this normative expectation, and accordingly, moral repair involves communal efforts to restore confidence in shared moral standards, trust that members of the community will uphold those standards, hopefulness “that we and others are worthy of the trust we place in each other” (Walker 2006, 24), and attempts to hold wrongdoers accountable. While I focus on repairing the intrapersonal effects of internalized oppression rather than relationships, I take Walker’s moral repair as a loose basis for my discussion. Reparative resistance amounts to attempts to *restore or strengthen* these capacities which are damaged by oppression—the capacities needed to be an agent with and among others, which are among ‘the basic elements’ of agency that Walker is concerned with. In this sense, reparative resistance is a more basic form of repair that strengthens those aspects of agency oppression threatens.

Why frame this repair in terms of *resistance*? One may wonder whether reparative resistance really counts as resistance. It does not declare messages of justice and seems to all but ignore the structural forces of oppression, focusing instead on individual agency. One may object that I’m merely repurposing Bierria’s “insurgent agency,” which navigates within systems of oppression without challenging them (2014, 140). But isn’t the point of resistance to dismantle these limitations, and doesn’t reparative resistance miss this aim?

In response, first recall that the form of reparative resistance I’ve outlined is intersubjective. Repair and resistance are conceived of as shared efforts of empowering each other rather than ways to bolster individual agency. Additionally, I argue that these seemingly

small effects of agency recognition and exercise are genuine acts of resistance. Tamara Fakhoury argues that “quiet resistance” is motivated by concerns of “personal attachments to certain people, pursuits, or activities” rather than reasons of impartial justice (2020, 404). Fakhoury broadens the conceptual space for resistance that is not motivated by aims of justice and may not necessarily attack structures of oppression. Quiet resistance is meaningful because it allows one to uphold important values in one’s life (2020, 419). Similarly, I argue that reparative resistance is a worthwhile form of resistance because it reclaims an agency that has been wrongfully damaged by oppression; it is important *to these victims’ lives* that their agency is reclaimed.

Repairing the harms of internalized oppression should count as resistance for two reasons.²⁷ First, a constricted sense of agency can preclude resistance against systems of oppression. Nabina Liebow notes that “Feeling as though one lacks [a] capacity for agency can...seriously threaten one’s view of the self as a capable moral agent” (2016, 715). I add that a diminished sense of agency can forestall action: if one does not view themselves as a full agent, it is harder to challenge that conviction with action. Mitsuye Yamada writes of the “double invisibility” of Asian American, middle-class women who are expected to be quiet, obedient, and lack political opinions (2015, 32). The internalization of these expectations can keep such women “ineffectual in the milieu in which she moves” (2015, 32). A perceived lack of ability to make any change in the world can undermine the will to try to do so.²⁸ This suggests that even viewing oneself as an agent can be resistant as it challenges oppressive messages. Echoing these existentialist notions, Collins argues that in the context of Black feminist thought:

When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so.

²⁷ Additionally, I do not claim that reparative resistance is the only form of resistance. Resistance that targets structures of oppression are of course important and may often take precedence over reparative resistance.

²⁸ Recall the argument in the second section: one way around this worry appeals to the ambiguity between self-regarding and other-regarding agency and the subsequent appeal to intersubjective agency expansion.

Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects. (1991, 106-107)

Reclaiming a sense of agency can be a powerful form of resistance that can also contribute to resisting systemic oppression. Given that oppressive structures shape agency in limiting ways (Hirschmann 2003), and that a sense of agency seems foundational for any project of resistance, reparative resistance can facilitate resistance that targets structural oppression. There is transitional value in reclaiming agency.

Second, in addition to the instrumental value of facilitating resistance against systemic oppression, reparative resistance matters for the sake of agents themselves. Resistance is about dismantling the systems of oppression that keep so many caged. But it should also be about improving the lives of the individuals who suffer under oppression. These two aims need not be in tension: the intersubjective repair of internalized oppression *does* target a system of oppression—the psychological aspect—while helping individual agents reclaim their agency. The harms of oppression are manifest in real people and the relationships, goals, passions, projects, and struggles that make up their lives. And aren't we fighting to make these lives better—not just materially (though that concern may rightfully take precedence), but existentially?

Daniel Silvermint argues for a well-being account of resistance according to which victims have an obligation to resist because resistance protects and promotes victims' well-being (2013, 417). It does so both intrinsically, "since engaging in resistance *just is* a self-respecting, autonomous response to oppression" (Silvermint 2013, 418) and instrumentally by promoting self-respect and self-esteem (420-421). Silvermint's grounds for this obligation reveal an important insight: the focus on promoting and protecting victims' well-being is important

because of the oppressive burdens they face and the goods they are denied (2013, 420).²⁹ As Silvermint puts it, “the moral weight of one’s own well-being necessitates resistance” (417, fn 43). While I ground my argument in promoting agency rather than well-being, a similar logic applies: it is precisely because victims are wrongly restricted in their agency—a fundamental feature of the human condition and a necessary component for so much that is good in life—that resistance efforts should care about repairing that agency. Reparative resistance is a form of resistance both because it is a means to further resistance that targets oppressive systems and because it challenges a harm of oppression that bears on real lives.

V. Conclusion

The effects of internalized oppression can be devastating, interfering with the ability to authentically direct one’s life and see oneself as a capable agent. While resistance cannot focus only on the repair of internalized oppression, reclaiming a sense of agency by helping others exercise their agencies can be a step towards collective empowerment. Though I’ve proposed intersubjective agency expansion as one way to help repair internalized oppression, this strategy is more widely applicable; it is a worthwhile effort even absent internalized oppression. For example, it can inform resistance aimed at structural changes by asking what structures, policies, and institutional reforms can support the agencies of all involved. Additionally, these efforts can prioritize the concrete expansion of material options that does not come at the expense of the most vulnerable. More modestly, I hope this strategy reminds us of our interconnectivity: the ways our actions are built upon the actions of others and stand to impact them. Our choices can

²⁹ Though I don’t argue for an obligation to resist oppression.

serve as an opportunity to embody what Beauvoir calls “an irreducible truth”: “I concern others and they concern me” (2018, 78).³⁰

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