RESPONSIBILITIES FOR REFORM: ESSAYS ON ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

by

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(Under the Direction of Melissa Seymour Fahmy)

ABSTRACT

This thesis contains two essays concerning systemic injustice which make the case that most members of society have an obligation to reform unjust systems that affect the lives of those around them. The first chapter contains arguments concerning who possesses these reformative obligations. I consider justice in a general manner and then argue that most members of a society have a responsibility to reform based on their social connections. I make the claim that victims of injustice have obligations to contribute to reform due to the unique perspective by which they know injustice. The second chapter establishes what actions individuals might take to satisfy their obligations to reform. I argue that victims can contribute greatly by sharing their experiences as testimony. If testifying is too demanding, I argue that victims can satisfy their obligation by practicing internal resistance. Bystanders to oppression can protest injustice to disassociate themselves from its harms.

INDEX WORDS: Ethics, Systemic Injustice, Moral Obligation, Oppression

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DEDICATION

To Mar, for always giving me hope and for being a safe shelter from the storms of life.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER 1

Determining Moral Responsibilities for Systemic Reform

1. Introduction

The rectification of societal injustices is one of the most pressing issues facing modern societies. As recent years have seen an increase in the public consciousness of systemic injustice, all manner of social institutions have had to acknowledge their histories of extracting both social and economic goods from one group to enrich others. Limited opportunity for marginalized groups has led to injustice and inequality across a wide range of social groups. These individuals who suffer from injustice have been marginalized for any manner of reasons, from unjustified perceptions of abilities based on sex or race to regional discrimination to individuals simply being convenient targets for exploitation. While examining the history of these injustices is a fruitful endeavor (and likely a necessary one for the effective rectification of injustice), an exploration into who is responsible for making the effort of correcting the harms of systemic injustice would serve reformative efforts well. In an ideal world, all members of a society would participate in this endeavor. Unfortunately, we do not live in this ideal world. Those who are the most responsible for injustice have been shown to shirk their responsibility to right these wrongs. My goal in this chapter is to investigate which individuals have responsibilities to engage in systemic reform. I will argue that most individuals in a society have some responsibility to participate in these actions. Perhaps controversially, I will argue that those who are victims of injustice have unique obligations to participate in reform, despite the fact that they neither

contribute to nor benefit from injustice. I argue that with the contribution of victims, systemic injustice is more likely to be successfully reformed.

Throughout this thesis, I will frequently use some variation of the term "systemic reform" to describe actions that are taken with the intent of addressing injustice or raising awareness of issues of injustice. The term is intentionally somewhat vague, as a wide range of actions and behaviors are likely necessary on the path to a more just society. Chapter 2 will develop a case for several actions that can satisfy our obligations to reform. For now, some examples of what I take to be cases of systemic reform might be participation in protests or demonstrations to raise awareness of injustices, involvement in organizations dedicated to addressing societal injustices, or donations to political candidates or activists supporting the rectification of injustice. The specific actions that an individual might take depend greatly on that individual's ability and personal responsibility, so our definition of a reformative action should include a wide range of actions. I will elaborate further on this notion in a later section.

2. Justice and Injustice

To begin a discussion of resolving injustice, we should begin by attempting to define justice. Though the notion of justice seems to underpin many moral systems, finding an exact definition of the concept has puzzled philosophers for millennia. I do not intend to provide an original answer to this question, but having some definition of justice to work with should allow us to recognize injustice with reasonable certainty. I am less concerned with the definition of justice and injustice and more interested in identifying who holds a responsibility for rectifying injustice once it is identified. My arguments and conclusions should work within a variety of moral systems.

In an article on justice, David Miller examines the subject of justice and offers a potential core definition from the *Institutes of Justinian*, a codification of Roman Law. In this, justice is defined as "the constant and perpetual will to render to each his due" (Miller). The definition that Miller chooses will serve our purposes here. Justice and the pursuit of it implies a desire to dispense things to people as they deserve them. The "things" that are being dispensed might be physical goods according to need or they might be rewards or censures as a response to an action. That justice is a "constant and perpetual will" implies that the application of justice should be consistent across many cases. We might say that injustice occurs where this is not carried out. If Person A steals a fruit and does not receive a punishment while Person B is punished for the same crime, justice has not been rendered and injustice has taken place.

Perhaps most importantly for this project, the pursuit of justice generates obligations on moral agents. Miller notes that justice is something that is demanded from people (Miller). Within the definition of justice given, just treatment is something that is "due" to each person. As moral beings, we have an obligation to act justly where it is possible. To act unjustly where it is possible to act in a just manner would be morally wrong, and we would likely say that the individual or group that acts unjustly has some responsibility to rectify this wrong. It is my goal to establish that more than just the perpetrators of injustice possess a responsibility to right the wrongs of injustice in society.

One reason for this belief lies in how injustice might be carried out without the ill intent of any people. Rather, institutions themselves might be set up in such a manner that unjust outcomes can occur without the malice of any agents. We might call this phenomenon "structural injustice." In an essay examining the injustice of sweatshop labor, Iris Marion Young offers a definition of structural injustice:

> Structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities. (Young 114)

The existence of structural injustice leads to unjust institutions. Examples of unjust institutions might include a criminal justice system that enforces laws inconsistently depending on location or demographics, or perhaps a political system that denies rights, such as voting, to marginalized groups. We might examine Young's definition in more detail to reveal how institutions that are structurally unjust do not require the malicious intent of agents to produce injustice. The problem noted by Young references how "social processes" put people under threat of domination or deprivation, rather than this threat existing due to an agent's malicious intent. For example, an individual who generally supports the rights of women might not recognize a lack of women's suffrage as unjust and they might fail to speak out against the practice. The origins of these social processes are often holdovers from earlier times. Young notes that "most of the conditions under which people act are socio-historical," meaning that individuals are influenced by previous actions that have real effects on the world of today (Young 113). While some of these previous behaviors were consciously intended to marginalize people (consider a system which was instituted to keep one group of people from living in a specific area), even seemingly benign actions might carry unintended consequences for future people. This results in institutions that exist today which perpetuate systems of injustice without any ill intent from moral agents. Within this essay, I will primarily consider this issue, commonly known as systemic injustice, and how we might determine who is responsible for reforming unjust systems.

Before I move into a discussion of how we might begin to determine who is responsible for rectifying the harms of injustice, it should be noted that the presence of inequality in a society is not necessarily the same as injustice. Inequality might certainly be a relatively passable test for determining injustice, but it is not always the case that injustice is present where inequality exists. In an attempt to explore the topic of justice, John Rawls defines two principles of justice which he supposes to encapsulate justice. His second principle lends some insight into how inequality might be permissible without being unjust:

> Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:
>
> (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and
>
> (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. (Rawls 266)

Rawls argues that inequality can be permissible if the inequality is arranged so that the least advantaged person in a society is the most benefited by inequality. We might envision many cases where inequality exists to the benefit of a majority of people. For example, in a representative democracy, denizens of an area elect someone to represent their interests in a governing body. Ideally, this representative should strive to represent all of their constituents as fairly as possible in order to benefit them. While the representative is privileged to an unequal amount of social (and likely economic) influence, they are granted this advantage for the benefit of all those who they represent. Of course, the representative could use their position for their own benefit and thus act unjustly, but the mere presence of inequality does not indicate injustice.

3. Who Has Obligations to Reform Systemic Injustice?

With some conception of justice in mind, we are now better equipped to move into a discussion of who possesses a responsibility to participate in the reformation of systemic injustice. At first glance, we might assume that the individuals who are directly involved in the intentional creation or perpetuation of injustice have an obligation to participate in reform. It might seem that the participation of others might be supererogatory and morally praiseworthy, but that the only ones with an obligation to engage in reform are those who implement injustice. While simple, I find this view to be insufficient in that it does not require enough participation from individuals to successfully rectify issues of injustice. As I have argued in the previous section, we might easily imagine systems of injustice which have no intentional participants. Perhaps an antiquated system was implemented to enact prejudiced beliefs, but all those who hold such beliefs are no longer living. Under this view of responsibility according to intention, no people would be responsible for the rectification of injustice. Meanwhile, the unjust system would remain in operation, furthering the propagation of injustice. The conclusion that we must rely on moral supererogation to resolve injustice in some circumstances does not seem sufficient in resolving systems which passively and actively harm people in society. Rather, it should be our default reaction to injustice that it *must* be resolved. Therefore, I will argue that most individuals possess a positive duty to engage in systemic reform when they are made aware of injustice.

Rawls offers the idea of "natural duties" which we possess as moral agents regardless of our affiliation with any social institutions (Rawls 98-101). These duties might include a duty to help others who are in need as long as one does not incur a significant personal cost or a duty to avoid causing unnecessary suffering to others. We possess these duties without needing to

operate within a social framework. Instead, these duties and the obligations which stem from them are mandated by our existence as moral beings. Rawls claims that the duty of justice is one of these natural duties (Rawls 99). This duty necessitates that we align ourselves with institutions that are just in at least their basic structure. Specifically, Rawls states that, "It also constrains us to further just arrangements not yet established, at least when this can be done without too much cost to ourselves" (Rawls 99). Rawls articulates a duty which we possess as moral beings which requires our commitment to bringing about just institutions where they do not already exist. We possess this obligation as a moral being, not due to any individual failure of justice. All moral beings possess a duty to engage in the creation of just systems and to battle injustice where it is found. Thus, the responsibility for systemic reform falls on all individuals.

The view offered by Rawls seems more plausible than attributing responsibility for social reform based on a responsibility from ill intent. Rawls' position would require all individuals to participate in reformative actions as long as they are able to do so without incurring a significant cost to themselves. However, I believe that Rawls' conclusions may be too strong and that following them to their logical conclusion might result in little meaningful help towards rectifying injustice in the world. Since Rawls' natural duties require action from all people who are capable, we would thus possess some universal obligation to participate in actions against injustice for any circumstances where it is encountered, no matter the social distance from us. While this might sound acceptable at first, the utility of our aid towards reforming injustice drops off a great deal depending on how far removed we are from the injustice. Consider the example of a person who has never purchased a diamond who then learns of injustices that are being carried out against diamond miners. The consumer has no knowledge of the processes of diamond mining or how they might best allocate their resources, such as their time, voice, vote,

or money in rectifying this injustice. While they could likely do some good in addressing the unjust treatment of the diamond miners, their efforts might be considerably more effective at addressing injustices that are present in communities that they are closer to.

Young offers an alternative view of how we might better determine who bears responsibility for systemic reformation. I view Young's position as a useful augmentation we might make to Rawls' natural duties of justice as it expands the responsibilities of reforming injustice to a larger group of people. Young argues that rather than attribute responsibility to engage in reform according to the liability of those who intentionally perpetrate injustice, we should instead seek to take responsibility on the basis of social connections. She defines her social connection model of responsibility by saying that "individuals bear responsibility for structural injustice because they contribute by their actions to the processes that produce unjust outcomes" (Young 119). Rather than argue that we have responsibilities to reform all injustice, Young focuses on the injustice which we contribute to by engaging in unjust systems, consciously or unconsciously. This offers an advantage over the system of Rawls in that we possess a greater responsibility to rectify injustices that we contribute to and are thus closer to. Due to this closeness, we might offer more effective aid towards the rectification of injustice.

A distinction should be made in how Young's model of social connection differs from simply assigning reformative responsibility according to causal liability. At first glance, the two might seem similar in that both consider the participation of an agent in unjust actions in determining the responsibility one has to reform. However, Young finds the difference between the two by examining the roles of certain background conditions surrounding acts from both perspectives. Young argues that the liability model "considers the process that brought about the harm as a discrete, bounded event that breaks away from the ongoing normal flow" (Young 120).

A liability model of responsibility assumes that injustice stems from a single, discernable action that brings about harm. For example, a police officer might unjustly arrest a citizen without proper cause. The unjust arrest causes a deviation from the "ongoing normal flow" of justice in that the police officer fails to uphold a negative duty to avoid unjust actions. By identifying this unjust action, we are then able to take some measure to restore justice to some baseline. However, if we consider the existence of structural injustice, this view proves to be insufficient in identifying who possesses responsibilities. Firstly, the creation of an unjust system might be an aggregation of several other structures that lead to the unintended consequence of an unjust structure. Repairing this unjust system is not as easy as simply removing the preceding structures, especially if the structures otherwise result in just outcomes.

Furthermore, if an unjust structure has been in place for a long enough period of time, our identification of the structure as a deviation from some baseline might be impaired. Young offers the following claim: "When we judge that structural injustice exists, we mean that at least some of the normal and accepted background conditions of action are not morally acceptable" (Young 120). When we condemn instances of structural injustice, we are calling the baseline used to judge actions as just or unjust into question. Responsibility according to liability searches for deviations from a normative baseline as wrong without considering how the baseline itself could be flawed. Our actions within a flawed system cannot be judged on this model. Examining injustice on a social connection model of responsibility allows us to view injustice and our relation to it in determining what obligations we hold in reforming these systems without focusing on any baseline. Rather, the social connection model encourages us to view responsibility on a basis of how we are complicit in established systems without necessarily requiring an event to assign responsibility. Thus, through participation in compromised systems,

we possess some obligations to strive to reform these unjust systems where we encounter them within our communities.

4. Special Obligations for the Victims of Injustice

As we determine who possesses an obligation to participate in social reform, we should not forget to consider the responsibilities held by those who are victims of the injustice that is being reformed. Individuals who have suffered at the hands of social injustice intuitively seem to be minimally responsible for the reforming the unjust systems that have caused them harm. This thought seems supported when it is placed under scrutiny, as those who are harmed by injustice often suffer this burden for the profit of another. It is unlikely that victims of injustice would enter into such an arrangement willingly. As such, we might think that the duty which victims possess to reform these unjust structures is as minimal as their liability. I disagree. Though I believe this claim to be somewhat controversial, I will argue that those who suffer from social injustice do possess some obligation to participate in reform of the structures responsible for their harm.

My reasoning for this claim lies in a belief that those who possess a greater ability to enact effective solutions to issues of justice and injustice possess a correspondingly greater responsibility to do so. Of course, ability is not the only factor in determining who is responsible for efforts of reformative justice. We should not forget that those who directly engage in or profit from exploitative actions which lead to unjust structures bear a significant responsibility to reform these structures more equitably. However, one's ability is an important factor in determining their responsibility to engage in systemic reform. For instance, suppose two individuals are asked to donate a few dollars to a reputable charity. Person A is a comfortable and established billionaire, while Person B has little to no assets or savings. If Person B refuses

to make the donation, we would likely not say that they act wrongly in doing so. They likely possess an excuse in that they could not afford to make the donation without incurring a meaningful cost to themself. If Person A refuses the same donation, however, they would not be afforded this same excuse, as they clearly have the means to make the donation without incurring a significant cost to themselves. We might go as far as to argue that Person A acts wrongly in refusing to offer their aid. If they can offer aid which improves the life of another without bearing the cost of Person A, then they should do so. To refrain would be cruel and unnecessary. By this reasoning, someone who is able to offer a meaningful contribution to reforming an unjust social institution should offer their services, and they likely possess an obligation to do so in the absence of a significant cost to themselves.

It is not immediately obvious why those who suffer from injustice possess some special ability that requires them to act in the pursuit of social reform. In fact, the injustice that victims suffer might take the form of disenfranchising and disabling them from pursuing the reform which might lift them out of their disadvantaged position. For these individuals, their ability to engage in reformative actions would likely be significantly impaired. However, victims of injustice possess a unique knowledge of structures of injustice. This knowledge enables them to contribute to the design of effective solutions to issues of injustice in a particularly meaningful way. The knowledge of victims comes from having to live a life under the effects of injustice. By being impacted so significantly and personally by structures of injustice, victims gain a unique epistemic relationship to their injustice. By virtue of the unique standpoint through which victims are able to know the impact of unjust structures, they possess a unique ability to participate in reformative efforts which are actually meaningful in addressing the myriad ways through which unjust structures harm their victims. Some research shows that in cases of reforming the

exploitative working conditions of sweatshop labor, reformative systems implemented by employers which fail to involve the participation of sweatshop workers often struggle to provide lasting reform, and in fact, these non-collaborative solutions can serve to further harm workers and their rights (Esbenshade 165-176). Efforts at reform that do not involve the victims of injustice often fail to adequately address injustice. Without the contribution of victims, it is unlikely that lasting solutions to injustice can be reached. In the absence of a lasting solution to an unjust system, more individuals will become harmed by the systems that are in place. Because victims of injustice possess a special ability due to their unique epistemic standpoint, they hold a noteworthy obligation to participate in reformative efforts.

5. Are We Placing an Undue Burden on the Oppressed?

A natural criticism of the view I have proposed here is that an unfair burden is placed on the victims of injustice through an obligation for them to participate in social reform. Tommie Shelby presents this problem and offers his own alternative to my position in an essay considering deviance in the face of injustice, especially as found in poor African American communities. Deviance for Shelby refers to actions which are "sharply divergent from widely accepted norms," and he primarily refers to actions such as participation in crime, a refusal to work in "legitimate" jobs, and holding contempt for authority (Shelby 128). These deviant actions are often considered socially unacceptable, but Shelby considers if oppressed victims have an obligation to uphold such social norms. He argues that adherence to these norms comes from a sense of civic reciprocity. By participating in these norms, citizens should generally be granted some form of corresponding social benefit. In cases of systemic injustice, adherence to social norms is not rewarded appropriately, and oppressed members of society thus do not receive any benefits according to their adherence to norms. Shelby supposes that in these cases,

some forms of deviance are permissible (Shelby 151). Some deviant actions are still wrong in that they violate other natural duties we possess as humans, but certain socially determined norms cannot be obligatory without an expectation of reciprocity.

In his discussion of deviance, Shelby considers the question of who bears responsibility for social reformation in the face of oppression. He notes that contemporary philosophical debate focuses on the attribution of blame and reformative responsibility onto those who are the most benefited by unjust systems but that it fails to address what obligations disadvantaged people have to ameliorate unjust systems (Shelby 153). The reluctance to assign some duty to victims comes from a distaste for "blaming the victim," meaning that many philosophers do not want to saddle victims with additional burdens as they have received the most hardship from systems of injustice. Shelby seems to share this sentiment to some degree, arguing as I have that it would be unreasonable to require reformative action from individuals who it would be particularly costly or dangerous for. However, Shelby claims that while it would be unreasonable to expect these individuals to put themselves in harm's way, it is reasonable for these individuals to hold some responsibility to avoid actions which exacerbate the situation of injustice which they suffer from (Shelby 154). Actions that increase the difficulty of bringing about a just society would be similarly impermissible. This claim especially relates to the permissibility of certain deviant actions. Though oppressed individuals might be allowed to shirk certain duties borne from civic reciprocity, Shelby argues that they still possess other duties due to their status as moral people. Oppressed individuals might not be held to social conventions due to failures of reciprocity, but they still possess duties to others as people, including a duty to not make unjust systems worse. This does not necessarily include a duty to work to reform systems of injustice.

Shelby offers an interesting perspective on attributing responsibility for reformation, but I do not find that his conclusion goes far enough. The hesitation to "burden the victim" is an understandable one, but taking a passive approach to solving issues of injustice does not seem sufficient to rectify these harms. As I have argued, the participation of victims seems necessary to successfully address unjust systems. Rather than expecting victims to merely maintain the status quo as Shelby argues for, any meaningful change to injustice seems much more likely to come about if victims of injustice hold some responsibility to participate in reform. By possessing an obligation to reform, these individuals should take the necessary action to rectify these systems. Shelby acknowledges that the participation of the oppressed would likely be necessary to achieve goals of social justice, but he does not go as far as to obligate their participation since such an obligation might be unfair (Shelby 154-155). I find this to be a mistake. Without this active participation of victims, successful change does not seem likely.

Still, Shelby's concern of fairness is a valid one, borne of empathy for victims of injustice. Put simply, these victims who have suffered from injustices have already been through enough, and so placing a further burden on them to dig themselves out of an unjust situation would be cruel. Rather than implementing a solution which involves an obligation on those who have been victims of injustice, we should instead search for a solution which does not rely on the participation of the people who have the least to give. One might argue that a fairer solution would be to place an even greater responsibility to reform on those who have benefited the most from the injustice that is being reformed while not placing obligations on the victims.

While these concerns are well-founded, I do not find them to be sufficient in overturning the obligation held by victims of injustice to work towards reforming unjust systems. As I have argued earlier, it seems highly unlikely that successful change to unjust institutions can come

about without the participation of victims of injustice. Without successful reform, unjust institutions will continue to produce injustice and cause further harm to those who exist under them. Even if we accept that it would be cruel to saddle victims of injustice with an additional burden in striving to repair these systems, there seems to be a greater moral wrong in allowing systems which continue to produce harms to carry on. Thus, at its worst, it seems to be the lesser of two evils to burden victims of injustice with obligations to participate in reformatory efforts. Even if we accept that it would be in some way cruel to obligate the victims of injustice in this manner, it would be worse to allow unjust systems to continue indefinitely and result in further harm to more people.

6. Conclusion

What we ought to do in addressing injustice when it is encountered within our societies remains a difficult problem to address, with as many solutions as forms of injustice. However, I have presented arguments in this chapter on who possesses an obligation to participate in efforts of reforming injustice, whatever they might be. The burden of reparative effort towards unjust systems should rest on all those who contribute to these systems, benefit from them, or have the ability to repair these systems. Furthermore, victims of injustice possess a special obligation to participate in reforming that injustice due to a unique knowledge gained through life under an unjust system. Through this knowledge, victims possess a powerful ability to determine what steps should be taken to fully address structures of injustice so that they cannot be allowed to cause further harms.

CHAPTER 2

Satisfying Reformative Obligations

1. Introduction

Chapter 1 of this thesis presented arguments regarding who bears responsibilities for engaging in social reform when confronted by systemic injustice within society. This chapter will address the actions that are required from those who possess duties to engage in activities of social reform in greater detail. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the specific actions required from individuals who possess these responsibilities can vary somewhat according to ability, but directing some thought towards the issue of what actions might be generally required is sure to be a fruitful endeavor.

Addressing the issue of reforming systemic injustice is not one that has been substantially explored in philosophical literature. However, philosophical efforts have been made to determine what responsibilities we hold to address oppression within our societies (Boxill 1-12; Harvey 13-27; Hay 21-45; Vasanthakumar 465-480). While perhaps not always identical, I find the issues of oppression and systemic injustice to be closely linked, and they often appear simultaneously. As such, the arguments provided by other philosophers on our duties to resist oppression are easily adapted to arguments of systemic injustice. Thomas E. Hill Jr. defines oppression as "a systematic, persistent, and damaging mistreatment of members of a group of people identified, for example, by race, religion, gender, or ethnicity ("Moral Responsibilities" 344). Oppression seems to imply that injustice is present in some way. That oppression is "systematic" demonstrates that it often permeates a society in much the same way as instances of systemic

injustice do. However, it does not appear that oppression always indicates the existence of systemic injustice. For example, a serial kidnapper who exclusively targets women mistreats his victims in a systematic, persistent, and damaging way, but they might do so without the systemic support of a broader community or the laws of a nation. We might suppose that upon discovery of their crimes, the kidnapper would be apprehended and punished accordingly. If, perhaps, the testimonies of the kidnapper's victims were to be disregarded because of their gender, then the oppression would be systemic as well, but I only mean to show that oppression is not always systemic in nature. To be clear, oppression is always unjust in nature, but the injustice of oppression is not always of a systemic nature.

As we explore what actions might be required by those who have responsibilities to reform systemic injustices, we should remain conscious of the objection that obligations to participate in social reform might be overdemanding. We might consider obligations overdemanding when acting on them comes at a significant cost to the well-being of the agent who is obligated to action. It is not necessary for this project to specify what exactly constitutes a significant cost to oneself, only to acknowledge that this is sometimes the case. In cases of obligatory actions that are overdemanding, agents are released from their obligation. For example, I do not think it is controversial to claim that we have an obligation to save someone whose life is in danger as long there is no significant cost to oneself. If a person comes across someone who is drowning but they could only rescue them at the cost of losing their arm, they would not have an obligation to save the other person. To do so would be heroic, but not obligatory.

It is my objective to present arguments for various actions that are important to the goals of social reform. If an individual would perhaps be overburdened by certain actions geared towards reformation, other courses should be available. If a victim cannot arrange for time off from work

to attend a protest and would thus be overburdened by attending, then perhaps sharing their voice and experiences as a testimony to the injustice that they have experienced would be adequate in satisfying their responsibility to reform. A wide range of contributions are necessary towards the end goal of the reformation of systemic injustices, so providing an account that allows many contributions to satisfy one's obligation to engage in reform is crucial. To this end, Section 2 of this chapter will address how victim testimony can satisfy one's obligations to reform. Section 3 will consider the viability and impact of an individual's internal resistance to oppression as a means of enabling systemic reform. Section 4 will analyze how acts of protest against systemic injustice can be used to further the cause of reformation.

2. The Impact of Victim Testimony

As established in Chapter 1, the importance of involving victims in reformative efforts cannot be understated, and I am skeptical of the conclusion that successful efforts to reform systemic injustice can be achieved without the participation of its victims. Victims are crucial in this process due to a special epistemic relationship which they hold towards the injustice that they suffer from. The unique epistemic position which victims are able to view injustice from is developed from their knowledge of the myriad ways in which systemic injustice affects them. Because of the harms that they have suffered, victims are able to make a unique and necessary contribution in ensuring that systemic injustice can be properly reformed. As the perspective held by victims is necessary to fully address and prevent further harms from systemic injustices, their participation in reform is obligatory. Due to the nature of what victims are able to offer to reformative efforts, a powerful method of participation in reforming systemic injustice is victim testimony.

The testimony of victims is the most crucial part of reformative efforts, and it is no accident that our considerations of systemic injustice begin here. Testimony from victims is often how the consciousness of systemic injustice is able to be developed. Institutions that are systemically unjust and inflict harm on people might not be perceived as unjust until victims of injustice come forward to report their suffering. For example, the inhabitants of a country might generally look favorably on the criminal justice system that exists within their nation and think that it functions well in spite of the fact that a concerning number of the accused are sentenced unjustly. Victims of this injustice might be sentenced without proper due process, or they might be subjected to unnecessarily harsh punishments for minor crimes. Without the testimony of those who are harmed by these unjust practices, the general consciousness of this nation might remain ignorant of the injustice being carried out by its criminal justice system. Once this consciousness is developed, then support might begin to build for the movement of systemic reform, but without the initial testimony of victims, reformative efforts might fail to get off the ground. Thus, victim testimony can act as an initial foundation for efforts towards systemic reformation.

A concern regarding the viability of victim testimony in providing a foundation for reform movements might arise here. If victims are working against oppression of a systemic nature, there might very well be some amount of discrimination against those victims who try to share their voice. Discrimination of this kind might serve to invalidate the testimony of the victims of injustice (their testimony might be considered invalid because their sex is too emotional or their race cognitively impaired). This discrimination is often recognized as a necessary feature of many oppressive systems in order to legitimize the systemic mistreatment of a marginalized group (Vasanthakumar 467; Hill 344). After all, it is easier to deny rights to a group that is

viewed as an inferior people, if they are seen as people at all. In the face of this discrimination, the victims of injustices may encounter difficulties in having their voices taken seriously.

While this is perhaps a discouraging reality of resisting oppressive systems, I do not believe that this difficulty lessens the importance of victims making their experiences heard. Bernard R. Boxill provides a relevant consideration while considering the responsibilities that the oppressed hold towards resisting their oppression. He notes that the oppressed have grounds to resist due to the fact that they have a "responsibility to repudiate the insult and falsehood of oppression" and that "oppressors say by their actions if not always in their heart of hearts that the oppressed are their tools and dependents" (Boxill 10). Boxill acknowledges that some core part of oppression involves the assumption that those who are oppressed are in some way lesser than the oppressor, and that this belief is untrue. The oppressed victims have a responsibility to strive to refute the oppressive stereotypes that are placed on them by their oppressors. Without these efforts, oppressive practices and unjust systems might continue without notice indefinitely. By providing their testimonies, victims are able to shine a light onto practices of systemic injustice and they are able to challenge oppressive stereotypes that serve to hold victims of injustice back from more equitable treatment. Though the reality of dismissal due to unjust stereotypes is one that victims of injustice face when coming forward with their testimonies, it is a necessary struggle to overcome in order to successfully rectify practices of systemic injustice.

This account of testimonial responsibility might seem to focus too strongly on what responsibilities the oppressed have to offer their testimonies without acknowledging that both bystanders[1] to oppression and oppressors themselves have similar responsibilities to accept these testimonies and check their own beliefs against them. As I have mentioned previously, without

[1] I borrow this term from other authors who write on subject of oppression, such Boxill, Hill, and Vasanthakumar.

the voice of victims, injustice might not be discovered in an adequate way to prevent harms from occurring. Bystanders certainly might fail to observe injustice that does not personally impact them, but even oppressors might be well-meaning but unaware of the harms that they cause. Suppose an ignorant but sympathetic factory owner works their employees to the extent the law allows them to without considering that the legal limit of the law might be well beyond what is fair to subject workers to. Upon being confronted with victim testimony, this factory owner might change their practices in order to align themselves with just practices, but they might not realize the extent of the issue until testimonies are offered. Both the oppressors and bystanders have a corresponding responsibility to victims to incorporate these testimonies into their own practices and beliefs without dismissing them unduly.

Even once systemic injustices are identified and efforts to reform them have begun, victim testimony has the additional benefit of providing a much deeper perspective into how that injustice plays out than what would be available otherwise. This point was argued for in Chapter 1, but it is worth reiterating here. Ashwini Vasanthakumar offers a similar account to my own which mentions the epistemic privilege held by victims due to their intimate understanding of oppression (Vasanthakumar 465-480). She notes that victims are both aware of the ongoing grave injustices which they have suffered from and that they have an "experiential knowledge" of it, that they know the nuanced and particular ways by which injustice harms (Vasanthakumar 470). The first class of knowledge mentioned by Vasanthakumar is related to the power of victim testimony in drawing attention to issues of injustice. Victims are aware of the ongoing harms that others are subjected to by oppression, and they are able to draw attention to these issues to help other victims. The "experiential knowledge" that Vasanthakumar refers to involves how victims are in possession of some practical knowledge of injustice (Vasanthakumar 470-471). Because of

this, they are better equipped to speak on the realities of oppression and injustice. Only a victim can relate the myriad ways in which oppression is able to intimately affect one's life.

The advantage of this unique perspective from victims comes through creating solutions to address issues of both oppression and of systemic injustice. With victim testimony, a more complete picture of how injustice harms is able to be created. Without this testimony, certain harmful aspects of systemic injustice might be overlooked while attempting to reform unjust systems. For example, a country that does not have comparable rights between men and women might seek to address this issue by extending voting rights to women. While this is surely a good start for reforming a case of systemic injustice, women might be further harmed through other oppressive structures that keep them from equality. While women in this country might vote now, they might still be barred from holding office or from owning capital and thus, they are still prevented in participating in this society as equals to their male peers. If victims share their testimony and it is received by other collaborators in reformative efforts, these efforts have a better chance of successfully addressing issues of systemic injustice.

3. Internal Resistance as Reformative Effort

Though victim testimony is an effective tool in bringing attention to systemic injustices and in developing a more complete understanding of how these injustices affect their victims, we should also acknowledge a potential limitation of this as a method of reforming injustice. While offering one's testimony might initially seem to be a relatively costless avenue of reforming systemic injustice, there are some scenarios where this measure might be particularly costly to victims. While I have argued that the previous or ongoing suffering of victims from injustice is not necessarily enough to override their obligation to contribute to reform, certain aspects of sharing one's testimony might be too costly to victims to morally require this action. Victims are

not exempt from their obligation because of their suffering at the hands of injustice, but there can be no reasonable expectation of victims to perform this duty when it would come at a great cost to themselves. Recall my earlier concerns of overburdening obligations. Sharing their experiences might be too costly to victims in certain circumstances. In this section, I will argue that when victims encounter these scenarios that make sharing one's testimony too costly, they might instead satisfy their obligation to reform through "internal resistance."

Firstly, what situations might raise the cost of a victim's participation in reform efforts to the point where sharing one's testimony becomes an overburdening responsibility? There are likely countless scenarios where this can be the case, but I will consider two common cases where I believe that the cost of testifying might be too high for victims to be obligated to participate. Note that I am not arguing that victims are absolved of their obligation to participate in systemic reform, merely that testifying might be too costly to them in these situations. The first of these situations where testifying might be overly burdensome comes in cases of systemic injustice where victims who speak out against their injustice might reasonably be expected to be heavily persecuted for their testimony. Some level of censure is likely inevitable when speaking out against systemically entrenched injustice, but a particularly oppressive establishment might threaten extreme retribution for dissent. We might consider how slaves that lack legal rights might be punished for speaking out against their oppression with beatings, imprisonment, or even execution. Carol Hay offers the example of Bengali women who are treated unfairly, and she argues that if these women were to try to argue for their fair share, then they might be "perceived as disobedient or unruly and could face retribution from people keen to remind them of their place" (Hay 32). In these cases, though the testimony of victims might help in generating support for movements of systemic reform, victims could easily be subjected to further

punishment as a result of their willingness to speak out. An obligation to testify about one's oppression would almost certainly be too costly to victims.

The second scenario in which testimony from victims might be unreasonably demanding occurs in cases where sharing one's experiences with others might be too psychologically costly to victims. To recount the intimacies of one's own potentially traumatic experiences under oppression or systemic injustice might be too harmful to share without incurring a significant cost to oneself. Vasanthakumar considers this possibility, saying:

> It might be argued that providing testimony, particularly of traumatic experiences, is psychologically infeasible. Victims may be too traumatised to revisit their experiences, may be unable to make sense of their experiences, and may be unable to articulate these to others. For such victims their experience of persecution is *debilitating* rather than enabling: such individuals do not count as capable agents and are not candidates for bearing a duty to assist. (Vasanthakumar 474)

Vasanthakumar's "duty to assist" refers to a general duty which individuals have to assist others as long as they are capable. She acknowledges the reality that many victims of oppression might be greatly burdened by their experiences and that the act of sharing these experiences might result in further harms to victims that they cannot be expected to bear. In these cases, victims could not have a feasible duty to testify at a significant cost to themselves.

When victims are in these situations, where testifying to their oppression comes at too great of a personal cost, we should consider other methods of reformative effort that can allow victims to satisfy their obligations. By returning to the ideas of Carol Hay, we can make the argument that victims can satisfy their obligations to reform through internal resistance to their oppression. Hay argues that victims have a self-regarding duty to resist their oppression on the grounds that

oppression is harmful to one's rational nature (Hay 22). She theorizes that oppression can cause harm to this capacity by causing self-deception, by interfering with rational deliberation, and by causing weakness of will (Hay 24-27). Self-deception harms rational nature by incentivizing oppressed individuals to believe falsehoods about themselves and their capabilities. For example, a member of a marginalized ethnic group might believe that they are not as rationally capable as a majority group in their society due to negative stereotypes. Oppression can harm one's capacity for rational deliberation by interfering with one's rational development, perhaps by removing access to a proper education or sufficient nutrition. Finally, weakness of will might result when an oppressed individual internalizes the stereotypes that are being purported about themselves by oppressors. These victims might believe and internalize negative stereotypes about themselves and begin to act in a way that is in accordance with this negative stereotype. In these cases, the ability of the oppressed to hold themselves to an appropriate standard of rationality is impaired, and the rational nature of victims is harmed through internalizing oppressive beliefs.

Hay justifies the value of preserving one's rational nature from the values of Kant, saying that "rational nature exists as an end in itself" and that "insofar as we are rational we must view our rational nature as conferring on us a value that restricts the way we may be treated" (Hay 22). To allow one's rational nature to be harmed is to fail in one's self-regarding duty to uphold their own value. We might make a very strong argument that existence under oppression and systemic injustice does damage one's rational capacity, and we thus have an obligation to resist oppression when we are subjected to it because of this threat.

By understanding how oppression is able to harm one's internal perception of oneself, we can better understand why internal resistance to oppression and systemic injustice can be satisfactory in fulfilling one's obligation to resist. Hay defines internal resistance by saying that

"someone could, at least theoretically, fulfill the obligation to respect her rational nature by becoming the sort of person whose rational nature was simply not damaged by oppression. An oppressed person could build up mental walls against many of the harms to her rational nature threatened by oppression" (Hay 31). To develop an internal resistance to oppression is to lessen the threat posed by internalizing oppressive thoughts. One might offer internal resistance to oppression when they learn to recognize the potential harms of oppressive beliefs inside of themselves, and by refusing to believe the lies oppression tells about their class of people, they are able to better protect their rational capacities from these dangers.

When the costs of external resistance to oppression and systemic injustice are too burdening on victims, practicing internal resistance can satisfy one's obligation to participate in reforming systemic injustice. However, the link between developing an internal resistance to oppression and making efforts to actually reform issues of systemic injustice (a mostly external activity) might be unclear. Remember that internal resistance can be an alternative to satisfy one's reformative obligation for those who would be overburdened by the costs of other actions which are aimed at reforming unjust systems. Even if a victim of injustice would be too burdened by external resistance at a specific time, some level of internal resistance is likely necessary in order to better position victims to engage in external efforts at a later time. We might consider an undocumented person who would be persecuted and threatened with deportation if they were to speak out against the systemic injustice that they suffer from. While any signs of outward resistance would be punished, undocumented people might engage in internal resistance to their oppression in order to prepare themselves to engage in reformative efforts at a time when the costs of external resistance might be lowered. Internal resistance to oppression lessens the chance

of victims internalizing the negative stereotypes about themselves and enables them to pursue their goals of systemic reform when it is more feasibly accomplished.

Similarly, for those who are overburdened psychologically by the demands of testifying to their oppression, internal resistance might help in bolstering their self-perception and lessen the psychological costs of recounting their experiences. Through internal resistance, victims might find themselves to have less inner conflict when it comes time to share their testimony. Of course, if one's experiences of life under systemic injustice are too traumatic to be shared and relived by victims, then they might not ever reach the point of being obligated to share their testimony. In this case, it might be the case that the testimony of other victims who do not endure the same burden can serve to validate and empower the experiences of those who are not able to share their own. Nevertheless, internal resistance can help to ensure that victims to view their experiences as a product of their oppressive circumstances and not as something that they deserved in some fashion.

4. The Power of Protest

The final form of action geared towards the reformation of systemic injustices that I will consider here is protest. While I have previously considered several actions which are more focused on how victims of injustice might fulfill their obligations, the act of protesting injustice is a particularly impactful avenue which is available to bystanders of injustice, those who are not necessarily victims of systemic injustice but who also do not benefit from its existence, at least not intentionally. These individuals make up a great deal of people, and we are all likely bystanders to some form of systemic injustice. As such, the viability of protest as a means of reforming should be closely examined. A note before I continue on my use of the term "protest": when I refer to protest, I refer to the general act of expressing one's disapproval of something

through objection in some form. To protest might also be understood as attending a discrete, public demonstration against an existing injustice. Though attendance of the latter form of protest is certainly an instantiation of the prior, I will focus on the prior and argue for the viability of a wide range of protesting actions.

To protest publicly against systemic injustice is undoubtedly a useful action on the path towards systemic reform. If victim testimony can be said to generate the initial foundation for a reform movement, the public protest of bystanders and victims of injustice alike serves to both grow and progress the aims of a reform movement. As more individuals protest a case of systemic injustice, awareness of ongoing harms spreads to a larger share of a population. In cases of systemic injustice where the testimony of victims is perhaps discredited through oppressive stereotypes, the protest of bystanders against unjust practices might serve to lend additional credibility to the movement for more prejudiced bystanders. Although protesting is perhaps not as impactful as other, more direct forms of reform (such as policy suggestions or regulatory measures), protesting against injustice seems to be a very practically useful action in any efforts to reform systemic injustice. Upon closer examination, protesting an unjust system seems to carry an additional moral good such that it might be more powerful than it might initially seem in satisfying one's obligations to reform.

To gather a more complete view of the moral efficacy of protest, we can return to the thoughts of Hill. He considers the usefulness of symbolic protests: occasions where protest has little to no practical effects on the perpetuation of injustice (*Autonomy* 52-66). Though I have argued that protest generally has some practical value in reforming injustice, by removing this benefit, we are able to better see what non-instrumental value exists within the practice. More specifically, Hill assumes a symbolic protest is one in which the protest cannot reasonably be

expected to address injustice in any way while also incurring some mild-to-moderate harm to the protester (*Autonomy* 53). These considerations eliminate any utilitarian appeal to the benefits of protest in order to morally justify the practice. He then evaluates several other prospective justifications for one to engage in symbolic protest, eventually arriving at the notion that participation in symbolic protest serves to disassociate oneself from the evil of injustice (*Autonomy* 57). Hill argues that one's moral identity is influenced not only through their actions but with whom they associate with. To associate with someone who enacts injustice is to condone this behavior in some way, and one might be required to consciously disassociate from them through a symbolic gesture.

The most important feature of protest as a method of disassociating from a group comes in cases where association with some morally distasteful group is loosely bound enough that one might be considered a member until they resist this designation. Hill provides an example of this: "Suppose, for example, that you have deliberately but informally associated yourself with 'whites' in a racially polarized community" (*Autonomy* 58). Though Hill implies some level of previous chosen association, I believe that this feature of association also occurs in cases where one's membership in a group is assumed due to their identity. Suppose an individual is a member of a gendered, ethnic, or religious majority that engages in oppressive behaviors towards a minority group. Even if this individual does not share the beliefs of the group they are identified with, others would likely still assume that the individual holds oppressive beliefs towards the minority due to their identity. Without a conscious and outward expression of disassociation from the oppressive group, the individual's mere identity as a member of this group might be interpreted as support for and approval of these harmful beliefs. Expressing one's beliefs through

protest serves as an effective tool of withdrawing support and disassociating from oppressive groups.

As a final note on the moral viability of protest in cases of systemic injustice, one's disassociation from an oppressive framework can serve to remove the justification for ongoing marginalization. Jonathan Parry offers the idea that acts of protest might have several aims: that they might be indicative, expressive, and transformative (Parry 394). An indicative goal of protest might be to draw attention to some issue of injustice, while an expressive goal might involve expressing one's personal attitudes of disapproval towards the matter at hand. Both of these aims have been argued for throughout this chapter. However, Parry proposes a third function of protest: that it is morally transformative as well. He argues that by protesting against something, potential justification is removed from what is being protested against (Parry 394). Consider how many institutions attempt to justify their decisions by arguing that their choice is what is beneficial for people or that it is what people want. Parry provides the example of the British government justifying the 2003 invasion of Iraq by claiming that the invasion was to protect Britain and its residents from attacks (Parry 395). When decisions are justified in this manner, protest can serve to remove the force behind these justifications. If a state claims that a law is implemented for the benefit of its people while a large portion of the population is protesting against this policy, the justification for this law is clearly flawed.

This is especially clear in cases of political protest, where citizens might demonstrate against a policy that they believe to be incorrect or poorly implemented. The politicians who enact these policies are supposed to act with at least some support from their constituents, and any actions they take in their role as policy makers are at least partially justified through this support. By protesting, citizens withdraw their support for the questionable policy, showing that the

lawmaker acts without the consent of some part of the populace. While it would be impossible for a lawmaker to act with the full consent of every constituent, protest in a large enough quantity can be sufficient to undermine any argument the lawmaker might make that their policy has popular support. If we consider this alongside issues of systemic injustice, it should become clear how the act of protest can work against unjust beliefs. Unjust systems might remain in place for generations before people are made aware of the injustice these systems cause. Those who resist reforming unjust systems might argue that these systems work for most people who encounter them or that the systems in question are responsible for more success than harm on an individual or group level. Through the protest of systemic injustice, these arguments are more easily defeated since evidence is being generated against the resistor's claims. Though systemic injustice is certainly morally wrong independent of these justifications, the transformative effect of protest can serve to remove potential justifications for the unjust systems which continue to cause harm to people.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued for several actions which individuals can take in order to satisfy their obligation to engage in reformative actions when confronted with systemic injustice. By no means is this a complete list, as the obligation to reform is one that might be satisfied in different ways according to one's abilities and the cost to themselves. I have argued that victims of systemic injustice have the power of their testimony at their disposal and that their testimony is especially important for successful reform. If victims are too burdened by the responsibility of testifying to their injustice, then the avenue of internal resistance to oppression remains open to them in satisfying their obligations. For both victims and bystanders of systemic injustice, protest exists as a powerful tool that can advance movements of systemic reform by increasing public

awareness of injustice while also serving to reduce the justification for unjust practices. Through the collaboration of all those who are able to strive against systemic injustice, successfully reforming harmful systems becomes a tangible reality.

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