

Theorizing Non-Ideal Agency¹

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Abstract

Despite the growing attention to oppression and resistance in social and political philosophy as well as ethics, philosophers continue to struggle to describe and appropriately attribute agency under non-ideal circumstances of oppression and structural injustice. This chapter identifies some features of new accounts of non-ideal agency and then examines a particular problem for such theories, what Serene Khader has called the *agency dilemma*. Under the agency dilemma, attempts to articulate the agency of subjects living under oppression must on the one hand avoid overemphasizing constraints on agency, and thereby producing paternalistic theories that “deny agency” for oppressed subjects, and on the other hand avoid failing to fully appreciate the effects of oppression on agency, thereby missing crucial features of how oppression unjustly shapes a person’s lived possibilities. This chapter traces this dilemma to a preoccupation with *ascribing agency*, which produces problematic descriptive and political effects for theorizing agency under oppression: what the author calls an *asymmetry problem* and a *disenfranchisement problem*. Finally, the chapter proposes that the agency dilemma might be ameliorated if theorists scrutinize more closely how moral, epistemic, and political agency interact and overlap in life under oppression.



In recent work, Serene Khader (2019, 2021) argues that philosophy that seeks to contribute to struggles against oppression depends crucially on an accurate grasp of nonnormative facts about the world: historical events, social practices, and real people’s experiences, perspectives, and projects. Building on the work of earlier transnational feminists, she highlights the harm that can be done when theorists and decisionmakers pursue normative conceptions of freedom, justice, or progress built on idealizations that *abstract away from* the realities of life under structurally unjust conditions. When academics are ignorant of empirical facts about life under oppression, they generate accounts that both (1) fail in their descriptive adequacy and (2) produce pernicious political effects in the lives of people those theories are aiming to address.

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This chapter examines how contemporary, non-ideal theoretical approaches to the concept of *agency* in philosophy and social theory can navigate such descriptive and political pitfalls. I use the term “non-ideal theory” broadly to identify accounts that take as their starting point existing social contexts and real-life actions, values, practices, and testimony. Non-ideal theories are marked by their willingness to radically modify proposed “top-down” explanatory theories in response to a broad base of “bottom-up” evidence from actually existing lives, communities, practices, institutions, and social movements.²

The concept of agency is particularly vulnerable to the two kinds of errors that Khader identifies because it often functions as a bridge concept straddling descriptive and normative projects. In its descriptive role, ‘agency’ seeks to pick out the conditions of action in people’s lives—particularly, for non-ideal theory, the conditions of action in lives shaped by unequal social conditions, structural inequality, and relations of oppression. However, beyond this descriptive function, agency as a concept is normatively laden for philosophers and political and social theorists: attribution of agency plays a central role in discussions of moral responsibility, and agency in the life of an individual or community is widely identified as a social good, closely related to flourishing and subject to concerns about distributive justice and paternalism. As with every key concept in social and political philosophy, our descriptions of agency are shaped by these inherited normative frameworks and motivating priorities. To produce theories of agency that are both descriptively adequate and politically useful, it is necessary to scrutinize the effects of this inheritance.

Section one of this chapter identifies several features of agency in contemporary accounts informed by non-ideal theory. The current state of the art for theorizing agency in philosophy and political theory reflects growing influences of the social sciences (especially sociology) and a departure from the narrow philosophical framework for agency inherited from action theory and liberal political theory.

Section two describes what feminist philosophers have followed Khader in calling the *agency dilemma*, which is a theoretical conundrum for those examining agency under oppression. In *Adaptive Preferences and Women’s Empowerment*, Khader (2011, p. 31) describes the agency dilemma as the dilemma of “trying to represent deprived people as agents without thereby obscuring the reality of their victimization.” Examining the roots of the agency dilemma in feminist debates of the 1980s and 1990s, I trace a disagreement and eventual stalemate among feminist scholars between two assessments of agency under oppression, which I call “agency skepticism” and “agency affirmation.”

Section three identifies a methodological challenge that any non-ideal account of agency must navigate, which is one reason why the agency dilemma has been so intractable. Philosophers theorizing agency under oppression typically build their theories around questions of *agency ascription*—that is, the project of identifying who has and who does not have agency. Two problems arise for theorists seeking to ascribe agency in oppressive social contexts: what I call the *asymmetry problem* and the *enfranchisement problem*. Both problems pose challenges for the descriptive adequacy of a non-ideal theory of agency—how well a theory describes the complex social world—as well as political challenges, which threaten to undermine the usefulness of a theory of agency in efforts to address injustice and oppression.

² This notion of ‘non-ideal’ is recognizable in the work of Khader (especially 2019, 2021) and Sally Haslanger (2021). I do not assess the extent to which it aligns with the ideal/non-ideal methodological debate in political theory.

In section four, I suggest some possibilities for non-ideal theories of agency to begin ameliorating the agency dilemma. The central task I advocate is to overcome the tendency in philosophy to compartmentalize among moral, epistemic, and political agency. On my view, compartmentalization of agency undermines the descriptive adequacy of theories of agency, particularly those that address agency under oppression. I argue that inquiry into agency in a non-ideal world can avoid the agency dilemma if we do a better job recognizing how multiple forms of agency are integrated in people's lives.

I. Features of Agency in Non-ideal Theory

Social and political philosophers, feminist theorists, and others have for a generation criticized the individualistic accounts of agency common in action theory. It is no longer convincing to frame agency as a matter of individual subjects formulating and acting on rational intentions. Though such bare-bones theories of agency begin from what the theorist and reader are meant to agree are mundane, everyday actions, they presuppose an able agent who for the most part deliberates and acts alone, isolated from valued relationships and in an environment with generally supportive (yet fungible) material and cultural conditions. In pursuit of a generalizable species-level norm, this approach brackets real-world conditions that are most important to agency as it actually appears: human dependency, varying social norms, exploitation, poverty, racialization, gender-based oppression, physical and mental disability, incarceration, and so forth. Returning to these conditions after the fact, as it were, once one is armed with the species-norm account of full human agency, at best yields limited insights into agency as it is actually practiced. At worst, it obscures how agency is lived for the vast majority of people.³

These drawbacks of the conventional action-theory approach to agency are now widely recognized among both ideal and non-ideal theorists. Contemporary, politically engaged theories of agency take into account several nuanced features of agency that make the concept more adequate for describing life as it is actually lived:

1. **Agency is contextual.** Agency in particular settings is determined by non-fungible cultural, material, and institutional factors, including existing relationships and practices of power. We take up available forms of action in ways shaped by a particular sociohistorical context, which provides particular social meanings, practices in which we can participate, and material affordances or technologies that we can employ (Kukla and Lance, 2014; Haslanger, 2018, 2019). While philosophers previously focused on how social and cultural contexts *limited* agency, it is now commonly noted that social context is also responsible for countless positive affordances for agency. In a particular setting, existing social practices, material conditions, institutional structures, and cultural norms might make it possible to name one's child, repair a bicycle, sue one's landlord, successfully say no (or yes) to a sexual encounter, or participate in a Passover seder. Contemporary non-ideal theorists

³ I limit my scope for this chapter to human agency, but similar problems arise when theorizing agency beyond human life.

describe these contextual possibilities for action as constituting a *choice architecture* or *scaffolding* (Haslanger, 2016; Kukla, 2021).⁴

2. **Agency is relational.** On a more local level, agency for an individual or group arises through networks of social interdependence and shared meaning-making. Positively, agency is made possible by relationships of mutual support and recognition that enable a person to fashion an identity (or sense of self) and formulate and pursue aims appropriate to themselves (see, e.g., Meyers, 2004; Krause, 2015). The relational character of agency has been explored especially insightfully in bioethics and discussions of how agency can be supported or scaffolded in contexts of vulnerability, such as for patients or care-receivers (see, e.g., Lindemann, 2014). Note, however, that such approaches often maintain the individual (or the individual will) as the unit that “has” agency, with the agential powers of the individual resulting from networks of relationships among individual agents. In contrast, other relational views attribute agency to groups themselves, where agency is not a feature of the individual but rather a product of a relationship.⁵
3. **Agency permits of degrees.** Contemporary social and political philosophers appear to share a consensus view that the concept of agency permits of degrees. That is, we can have more agency or less, and our environments can increase or decrease our agency depending on how they shape our possibilities for action (Krause, 2015; Kukla, 2021; Timpe, 2021; Millgram, 2021). Of course, some theorists avow that agency permits of degrees, and then nonetheless embrace an ideal of ‘full agency’ and seek to use that ideal as a starting point for describing possibilities for action under real-world constraints. I discuss below some drawbacks of a project of ascribing ‘full agency.’ In the meantime, it’s important to recognize that, if agency permits of degrees, then conditions that harm a person’s agency should not be said to “take away” agency; it is better to describe agential harms as *impeding* or *distorting* agency in particular, domain-specific ways. Similarly, the recognition that agency permits of degrees deflates the idea that policy or political actions are needed to “give agency” to someone who lacks it. Instead, improvements to a person’s possibilities for steering their life—gaining access to universal healthcare, making a dear friend, or gaining legal representation, for example—should be said to *facilitate* some kind of agency.

II. The Agency Dilemma

New accounts of agency that take seriously the above-mentioned features have taken important steps toward both descriptive adequacy and political usefulness. However, those theories often do not yet adequately account for the conditions of surviving and building a life and community under oppressive conditions. To do so, non-ideal theorists of agency must navigate a key set of competing concerns, which Khader (2011) has called the “agency dilemma.” On the one hand, when theorists emphasize constraints on agency caused by

⁴ Note that ‘choice architecture’ has a more limited meaning in the literature on ‘nudges’ and public policy interventions. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) use the term to refer to top-down decisions about presentation of information that can shape the outcome of choices. I follow Haslanger in using the term to pick out a more pervasive impact that the structural and institutional background has on the actions we can or cannot choose.

⁵ Khader (2020) cautions against positing an overly idealized view of the relational basis for agency or autonomy.

oppression, they risk producing paternalistic accounts that “deny agency” for oppressed subjects (Narayan, 2001; Bierria, 2014). On the other hand, by failing to fully appreciate and acknowledge the effects of oppression on agency, theorists risk overlooking important harms of oppression, and they miss a crucial lens for articulating how oppression unjustly shapes a person’s lived possibilities.⁶

The agency dilemma has arisen organically as a point of tension in longstanding efforts in feminist philosophy to articulate gender-based harms and the internalization of oppression. Feminist since at least Beauvoir have asked, why and how do sexist social structures coerce women? And how, when falling short of coercion, does patriarchy still win so much complicity and self-subjection? Natalie Stoljar (2000, *emph. mine*) uses the name “*the feminist intuition*” to describe skepticism about the autonomy and agency behind women’s embrace of oppressive norms. Stoljar writes from a position of inheritance of feminist explanations of the failure of agency in the 1980s, formative years for feminist political philosophy: most visibly, she inherits radical feminist approaches by thinkers such as Carole Pateman, Marilyn Frye, and Catharine MacKinnon, who focused on coercion in the societal background conditions of women’s agency, as well as Foucauldian feminists such as Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo, who focused on internalized oppression and pernicious self-discipline.⁷ I call these thinkers *agency skeptics*.

It is important to recognize that the feminist agency skeptics of the 1980s and 1990s played a crucial role in the first wave of necessary correctives to traditional action theories of agency: for non-ideal theorists interested in counteracting oppression, agency is not merely a matter of efficacy of intentional action in the world, but also a question of dynamics “upstream” from action, including one’s relationship with oneself, the choices made available through relations and structures of authority and power, and the epistemic resources by which one makes sense of one’s life. These are enduring contributions of the agency skeptics. However, for many feminist thinkers of that generation, the project of identifying who had and who lacked agency—more on this in section III—was deeply shaped by cultural dynamics of predominantly white feminist academic circles. Those dynamics distorted theorists’ analysis, leading them, for example, to presuppose certain benefits of conformity to oppressive norms (e.g., the assumption that women align themselves with patriarchy because it benefits them) and a stereotyped model of ideology and consciousness-raising that assumed a high degree of ignorance among the oppressed. Accordingly, (white) feminist theories of agency under oppression in the 1980s and 1990s struggled to adequately describe the lives of women outside relatively privileged classes in rich countries.⁸

Uma Narayan, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Saba Mahmood, and others have diagnosed how feminist philosophers and other politically well-meaning academics assume, outside of familiar Western bourgeois settings, that women are either “dupes of patriarchy” or “prisoners” of it

⁶ Haslanger (2017, p. 167) emphasizes that “one way critical theory contributes to oppositional social movements is to provide context, language and empirical research to articulate the nature and scope of the injustice involved in oppression.”

⁷ For a useful overview of the evolution of early feminist engagement with Foucault, see Deveaux 1994.

⁸ I do not mean to suggest that this failure has been fully left in the past; plenty of work on oppression and agency in contemporary philosophy continues to be parochial and insufficiently intersectional. Of course, then as now, the best work by feminist philosophers and other non-ideal theorists pushes against that parochialism.

(Narayan, 2001, p. 422)—either in need of epistemic enlightenment or liberation from total coercion (see also Abu-Lughod, 2002). As a corrective to the agency skepticism that looked for coercion or non-autonomy in women’s self-subjecting decisions, this transnational feminist critique moved to affirm and demand recognition of the agency in women’s lives.⁹ Narayan and other agency affirmers highlight the role of rational deliberation and savvy actions in the lives of people targeted by oppression, showing that agency skeptics overlook the many ways people strategically accommodate oppressive norms in pursuit of life projects backed by coherent and meaningful values in their cultural contexts—even if those values are illegible or portrayed as illegitimate under dominant (e.g., Western, liberal) moral systems (Khader, 2019, 2021; Madhok, 2021). Responding to both radical and liberal feminist agency skepticism, Narayan (2001, p. 422) draws on the work of Deniz Kandiyoti to articulate how women and others “bargain with patriarchy” in pursuit of their considered life projects. Mahmood (2004), meanwhile, calls into question the Foucauldian agency skeptics’ line, using Foucault’s analysis of “technologies of the self” and practices of “self-making” to valorize women’s active pursuit of the goods that accompany some subordinating social norms.¹⁰ More recently, Sumi Madhok (2013, p. 37) has expanded this commitment to recognizing agency in “cognitive processes, motivations, desires” and ethical self-relations, rather than judging agency only according to a “choice–action framework” that, she argues, misdescribes life under severely oppressive conditions.

Although they positioned themselves critically against skeptics who denied agency under oppression, agency affirming theorists built on the same feminist project by further raising the bar for how we demand descriptive and political adequacy from theories of agency. They highlighted the need for good empirical evidence to support theories of agency and coercion, and they forced feminists to address head-on problems of asymmetry and disenfranchisement that I describe in section III.¹¹ They also widened the theoretical vocabulary for recognizing resistance beyond antagonistic models. Tamara Fakhoury (2021), for example, affirms agency by turning attention to “quiet resistance” by which women pursue things valuable to them without publicly confronting oppressive norms, and recent work by Khader (2021b) emphasizes how some people pursue and preserve self-respect by going along with rather than contesting oppressive norms, saving their energy for things that really matter to them.¹²

The following section examines methodological problems that have shaped the debate between agency skepticism and agency affirmation, preventing non-ideal theories of agency

⁹ Khader (2012, p. 303) reconstructs the history of this debate slightly differently, describing as “agency critics” some of those I categorize as agency affirmers. She does so to pick out a family of arguments by transnational feminists criticizing feminist theories of adaptive preference. The thinkers I call agency affirmers are critics of the role of agency in adaptive preferences discourse, but they are affirmers of women’s agency under oppression.

¹⁰ Mahmood’s innovation reflects a wider recourse to later Foucauldian resources of practices of selfhood to conceive of active agency under structure, against earlier uses of Foucault’s account of “docile bodies.” See discussion in McNay (1992). Linda Martín Alcoff (2018) has also used Foucault to chart a nuanced account of practices of sexual agency in the face of oppressive social norms.

¹¹ Khader is a consistent voice calling for more nuanced and more extensive empirical research to support feminist political philosophy about agency and autonomy. See Khader (2019, introduction and chaps. 1 and 3).

¹² See also black feminist work on refusal and opacity, especially Stewart (2021).

from moving beyond the pitched battle of the agency dilemma. Following that discussion, I address in section IV how agency theorists can ameliorate the agency dilemma.

III. Problems of Agency Ascription

Reflecting on the power and pitfalls facing black feminist epistemology, Kristie Dotson diagnoses a problem arising from what she calls “ascriber dynamics” in social epistemology. She argues that, when a theory includes strong criteria for who counts or does not count as a knower, it opens up an avenue for exercising hegemonic power for the theorist (and the disciplines, fields, and institutions that back the theorist) over those who are the target or object of that theory. She cautions, “the authorized power to judge another epistemic subject (or ascribe positive epistemic status on a subject), is where a great deal of the workings of hegemonic power lies in epistemology” (Dotson, 2015, p. 2326). She goes on to claim that “there are many reasons why ascriber dynamics with respect to knowledge possession can and often do lead to disempowerment... [For one], generally, people are bad at ascribing knowledge possession, and, at times, communities are even worse” (p. 2326).

The same can be said about agency: people are bad at ascribing it, and communities—including communities of development practitioners and scholars—are often even worse. Yet, in theories of agency produced by the academy, ascription plays an even more central role than it does in theories of knowledge. Social epistemology, according to Dotson, can avoid the disempowering effects of ascriber dynamics by focusing on the conditions that facilitate *knowledge production* rather than the conditions that define *knowledge possession*. In other words, epistemologists can set out from the knowledge networks and practices that exist in the world, rather than begin from judgment over whether individuals count as knowers. This is not really possible for philosophical discussions of agency, however: actions do not exist and circulate in our communities the way knowledge does, which means that discussions of the environmental and relational conditions that produce or support agency unavoidably imply assessments that individuals have or do not have agency.¹³

On its face, the project of appropriately ascribing agency seems to be essential for understanding some key agential harms caused by oppressive power relations and for attributing responsibility for change. However, I am concerned that agency ascription *as a motivating aim* for theorists of agency may also have significant methodological drawbacks, in both political and explanatory dimensions.¹⁴ Taken together, the below methodological drawbacks suggest that at least as much attention ought to be paid to qualitatively rich questions such as *how* and *why*

¹³ Although she does not frame it in this way, this is essentially the problem Khader (2020) diagnoses for theories of relational autonomy. Those theories purport to describe the conditions that make agency possible, but they cannot avoid also ascribing (or in many cases denying) the agency of the subjects who find themselves living in conditions that are not ideal.

¹⁴ See J. Y. Lee (2022) for a related discussion. Note that Lee focuses on ethical and epistemic problems with ascription of autonomy, rather than on political problems that arise from the ascriber’s location within powerful institutions. Further, Lee is concerned with ascriptions of autonomy rather than agency, so she does not consider that harmful effects can accompany positive ascription (e.g., being held criminally accountable or targeted with state surveillance or violence because of one’s perceived agency).

people act, and *what* they do, and not only to delineating criteria for “what counts” as agency and applying those criteria for judgment.¹⁵

At least two methodological problems arise when theories of agency are developed for the primary purpose of agency ascription. I call them an *asymmetry problem* and an *enfranchisement problem*.

First, politically, agency ascription produces a by-now-familiar *asymmetry problem*: when we build our theories to assess the agency of those who are marginalized, we are likely to reproduce rather than challenge the power of theorists and institutions of knowledge production, while further disempowering people taken to be the object of theory. This concern is familiar from longstanding debates about adaptive preferences, autonomy, and paternalism (see Narayan, 2001; Lugones, 2003, especially chap. 10; Khader, 2019, 2020), where it becomes clear how underestimating or “downgrading” (Shelby, 2016) the agency of those living under oppression exposes them to significant harms. At stake here is the question of who gets to draw on the legibility and prestige of science, and who doles out the real benefits that attend to positive agency attributions. Note that if the asymmetry problem worries us at all, then philosophical projects of agency ascription must clear a higher bar of explanatory usefulness to justify this risk, and they must have guardrails in place to keep theorists answerable to the communities they claim to describe.¹⁶

Asymmetries of power are politically pernicious when theorizing agency, and they also distort the explanatory content of the theories produced. I have already discussed in section II how theorists far removed from actual contexts of oppression are more likely to miss important empirical facts about how people live their lives in those contexts. Beyond empirical concerns, however, the asymmetry between theorists and those whose lives they seek to explain distorts moral evaluations of *what matters* in issues of agency, and what agential harms consist in. Moral philosophers in the analytic tradition tend to make moral assessments that focus disproportionately on harms to dignity, such as insult or disrespect, while overlooking substantive harms like subordination and exploitation. However, denying agency to the oppressed is not harmful only, or even primarily, as disrespect. When theorists assert that someone does not have agency, they can actually undermine what agency a person does have: denials of agency can change what a person is able to do and be. People denied agency can be excluded from contracts and good-faith labor bargaining, can be subjected to paternalist interventions that limit their possibilities to determine the direction of their lives, and they can have their interests treated as lesser to the interests of those who are enfranchised and empowered.

Once philosophers shift away from the framework of disrespect to understand such harms, it becomes possible to examine harms caused by over-attribution of agency under oppression, as well. Theories that over-attribute agency—especially in its guise as individual free choice—can

¹⁵ Here I share a view proposed by Alisa Bierria (2014), that a shift from *measuring* to *mapping* agency with respect to forces of power and disempowerment might provide new insight into how agency is structured under particular, power-infused social conditions.

¹⁶ The problematic distribution of power in question here is structural, and it therefore cannot be fully resolved by the work of individual academics who themselves are also members of oppressed groups. However, some individuals might be better equipped and more motivated to hold their work accountable in the necessary way, which can help reduce the harm caused by this structural asymmetry.

be used to dismiss people’s genuine needs and expose people to state coercion. Consider, for example, how government actors attribute inflated agency to migrants and refugees to justify exclusionary border regimes. The same problem surfaces in contexts of anti-black racism, where authorities construe black people as “defiant” or “uncompliant” and use this to justify punitive action (see, e.g., Sheth, 2022; Bierria, 2023). Non-ideal theorists must recognize how misattributions of agency expose people to substantive harms. But the structural asymmetry in agency ascription makes those harms difficult to avoid and remedy.

A second methodological problem for agency ascription arises from limitations of the philosophical imagination about what full, unproblematic, or maximal agency should look like. When formulating a positive concept of agency, philosophers must be careful not to overlook injustices that distort the wider social context for that agency. Subjects said to “have” agency in the maximal sense tend to occupy particular legitimized, enfranchised positions with respect to dominant institutions and systems of meaning, which in turn distribute access to social uptake and power. This point, which we can call the *enfranchisement problem*, is developed especially clearly in recent work by Alisa Bierria (2014, 2023). Bierria argues that uptake is needed for one’s intentions to produce actions that move seamlessly and effectively in the social world, but the appropriate uptake in a society distorted by white supremacy is only extended to a person socially positioned as white or white-adjacent. So, a notion of ‘full agency’ in such a society tracks privileges of whiteness rather than a normative ideal to which all humans should aspire.¹⁷

The core observation behind the enfranchisement problem—that the category of the full human agent might presuppose the dehumanization and subjugation of others—has deep roots in critical, anti-colonial philosophy historically. Paulo Freire (2000/1970, p. 45) writes of the oppressed that “their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity.” Agency as such is presupposed as a good, but it must not turn out to be modeled on and indexed disproportionately to those who benefit from oppressive social systems.

With these two pitfalls in mind, recall how the agency dilemma appeared in the historical trajectory described in section II. Faced with the task of accurately ascribing agency under conditions of oppression, skeptics argued that women’s self-subjecting decisions were actually coerced, the result of ignorance, or otherwise non-autonomous. Meanwhile, agency affirmers sought to highlight how people living in oppressive societies act rationally, strategically, and with epistemic savviness in response to the conditions that frame their lives. Here’s where the hegemonic power invested in individual agency ascription distorted the debate. State entities, commercial actors, and NGOs—and the academics and practitioners who guide them—tie the dignity and rights for oppressed people to ascriptions of agency. To gain recognition as having (autonomous) agency—in the sense of making valid, free choices—protects from paternalistic intervention and state coercion, makes one a candidate to be consulted on policies and practices that might affect one’s life and community, and makes one legible as a potential democratic citizen. In light of these high stakes tied to agency ascription, Khader, Narayan, and many others explicitly pitched their work toward correcting bad agency ascriptions, with the aim to prevent paternalism and correct distortions that result from over-idealized notions of agency and autonomy (see Khader, 2020). However, a byproduct of that contestation has been that the

¹⁷ Analogous enfranchisement critiques can be applied to other assumptions behind notions of full or unproblematic agency, including ableist assumptions and assumptions that see settler or colonizer ways of life as the model for agency.

insights of agency affirmers and the rich local forms of agency they have described have often been flattened in mainstream philosophical discourse on agency. Work on agency by transnational feminists such as Mahmood, Narayan, Lila Abu-Lughod (2013), and others is today often reduced to the truisms that “Muslim women have agency too!” or more generally, that there is always agency wherever there is oppression.

IV. Ameliorating the Agency Dilemma: Reconceptualizing Epistemic, Political, and Moral Agency

Khader (2019, 2024) responds to the shadow cast by the agency dilemma over feminist politics by deflating the importance of agency: she argues that the affirmation of women’s agency is insufficient to ground feminist politics, which must necessarily be against women’s oppression broadly speaking rather than merely in favor of women’s freedom or agency. This means feminists need to ask not only whether people “have” agency, but what that agency entails and, in Khader’s (2019, p. 18) words, “what agency brings about in the world.” This shift appears useful for the purpose of grounding feminist politics as Khader defines it. However, for other less foundational questions, an agency-oriented approach remains indispensable for non-ideal philosophy. Beyond simply doubting or affirming whether people have agency, a robust understanding of the qualitative character of agency—how it works and what it does—can be a powerful tool for understanding not only the effects of oppression¹⁸ but also the process by which people mobilize political change. The latter has so far been missing from the agency dilemma framework.

Although I won’t argue for it in detail, I suggest that the two-dimensional character of agency in the agency dilemma is a result of a stilted framework for thinking about agency, inherited from subdivisions within the discipline of philosophy itself. There is a tendency in philosophy to compartmentalize modes of agency and investigate them within separate philosophical literatures—moral agency, political agency, epistemic agency—while obscuring their connections and interdependencies.¹⁹ This creates an obstacle for theorizing agency under oppression by both hiding ways in which different forms of agency are conflated in our discussions and, simultaneously, making it difficult to see how oppositional values, resistant knowledge, and both individual and collective action are often integrated in life under oppressive social structures. In this final section, I briefly discuss how inherited theories of moral, epistemic, and political agency distort non-ideal philosophy of agency under oppression, and I indicate how more care in both distinguishing between them and recognizing their interconnections might enable theories of agency under oppression to move beyond the agency dilemma.

Moral agency in contemporary analytic philosophy looms large as the condition of authorship between agent and action, broadly assumed to produce moral responsibility. In contemporary Strawsonian terms, moral agency with respect to an action makes a person a fitting target for attitudes and practices of holding responsible. Its purpose as a concept is to aid the

¹⁸ See Hirji (2021) for an insightful discussion of how oppression creates conflict between a person’s agential aims, by splitting apart the agency to pursue one’s prudential good and the agency to resist oppressive norms.

¹⁹ This tendency affects other disciplines as well, but its roots are in the differentiation between philosophical subfields, including philosophers’ and political theorists’ overinvestment in sharply distinguishing normative from descriptive, as well as theoretical epistemic claims from practical moral and political claims.

theorist—looking down from what Claudia Card (1996, p. 25) describes as the “administrative point of view”—to assign praise or blame, to mark appropriate candidates for reward or punishment. But a non-ideal, politically engaged theory of moral agency should consider how people act to intervene in moral judgments of their behaviors: How do disenfranchised people challenge dominant moral vernaculars—i.e., justifications and narratives about right and wrong—that prop up injustices like racial profiling? Or, conversely, how do people who are enfranchised by prevailing unjust social systems mobilize their positions to access excuses and justifications that let them off the hook in cases of wrongdoing? These questions address how people exert agency over the moral conditions governing their lives, an essential site of contestation for those living under oppression.²⁰

Though there is equivocation in the literature, the concept of *epistemic agency* is often deployed in mainstream philosophical work to describe whether a person counts as a knower, or—extending moral agency to the realm of knowledge—whether they would be appropriately praised or blamed for their beliefs and other doxastic states (e.g., Elgin, 2013). These are not such useful criteria for understanding agency under oppression; Gaile Pohlhaus (2020, pp. 233–234) observes that “delineating what it means to be a ‘good’ knower is less pressing to those who face systematic epistemic harm than the question of how to contend with that harm.” Yet, core epistemic activities like making sense of our lives, cultivating communities of meaning making, and developing knowledge that evades the distortions of dominant hermeneutical resources are all crucial for any kind of survival in an oppressive society. Amandine Catala (2020, 2024) argues that, by assuming particular, normative ways of developing knowledge, standard accounts of epistemic agency can undermine the ability of marginalized people to do these things.²¹ To make epistemic agency a more useful concept for examining agency under oppression, it has to be directed toward different questions: How is knowledge formulated, transmitted, and inherited despite epistemic distortion and epistemic oppression? How do people in various social contexts navigate and resist active and manufactured ignorance?²²

Political agency is conventionally theorized as the capacity for efficacious political action in the public sphere, enacted either by gaining recognition and representation of one’s interests or by more direct involvement in political decision-making, such as through local politics, activity in civil society institutions, or participation in public discourse (see discussion in LaVaque-Manty, 2002). In the context of the so-called Global South, political agency is often understood especially in terms of protest, revolution, and the demand to choose one’s political leaders. But a theory of political agency under oppression needs to describe a wider range of activities. I posit

²⁰ As examples of work along these lines, see Shelby (2016) and Simpson (2021), who each offer extended arguments disrupting prevalent moral vernaculars imposed on the Black American underclass. See also Ciurria (2019) and essays collected in Hutchison et al. (2018), which recast traditional questions of moral responsibility for a less idealized view of social reality. Lisa Tessman’s (2005, 2015) ongoing work on non-ideal moral theory and the challenges of moral practice under oppression are also enlightening.

²¹ She calls this “metaepistemic injustice.”

²² Jose Medina (2013) has made great strides in bringing this form of discussion of epistemic agency to the fore and exploring the relationships among epistemic resistance practices and other aspects of agency. Kristie Dotson’s (2014, 2018) work on epistemic oppression and the resilience of epistemic systems has also been valuable for integrating epistemic concerns into discussions of agency under oppression.

that non-ideal theorists should define political agency widely as *the capacity for shaping the structural and institutional conditions governing our lives* (cf. Alexander and Mohanty, 1997, p. xxviii). Understood in these terms, political agency becomes one useful dimension on which theorists can identify effects of oppression and the resilience of oppressive social structures. This enhances the descriptive adequacy of a theory by shedding light on the concrete political situation in people's lives.

In the context of the agency dilemma, political agency is the form of agency disrupted most for people living under severe structural oppression, insofar as enormous transnational forces, such as capitalism and imperialism, exert large effects on their lives (see discussion in Mohanty, 2003, chap. 2). Political agency is also undermined in the lives of middle-class white women and others exposed to gender-based oppression in rich countries, insofar as they lack possibilities to intervene in hegemonic ideologies like rape culture that shape conditions of their lives. So, using this improved concept of political agency, theorists can identify with more precision a key agential harm under oppression without falling into a broader agency skepticism. To accurately identify gaps in political agency in this sense lays out a program for solidarity and political action rather than denying the dignity of oppressed people.

Yet, that political program is only effective if theorists take seriously the agency-affirming insight that women and others living under even severely oppressive conditions are often epistemically savvy agents in their own survival and pursuit of valued aims. Narayan and others valorize practices of making sense of and navigating one's life through networks of support and meaning-making that come into existence sometimes unstably in the shadow of oppressive social norms.²³ Such agency, as Narayan argues, is plainly worthy of attention and should not be paved over by paternalistic interventions. If agency skeptics deny the validity of these forms of agency, they are in grave danger of reproducing the disempowerment I described in section III, because non-hegemonic resources for interpreting the world are precisely those perspectives usually obscured and distorted by academic and other institutional power structures.²⁴ An integrative approach to agency under oppression can examine how agency to navigate and intervene in the conditions governing one's life is developed and buttressed through practices of epistemic agency, understood in a non-ideal, qualitatively attentive light.

While the connection between political and epistemic agency is clearly generative for theorists examining oppression, moral responsibility and moral agency play more ambivalent roles. A preoccupation with assigning moral responsibility to actors—particularly as individuals—risks exacerbating the political problems of the ascriber dynamics described above; as Margaret Walker (2007/1997, p. 61) writes, “moral theorizing itself is a practice of intellectual authority,” with the status of moral philosopher “politically won and politically maintained.” As long as moral agency is conceived of primarily as the criterion for moral responsibility, then attributions of moral agency applied to those living under oppression will target people with

²³ On ambivalent agency and the unstable ground for coalitional or mutually supportive action, see Andrea Pitts (2021). Webster (2021) identifies these ways of practicing agency under oppression as a type of reason-responsiveness, particularly responsiveness to *social reasons*.

²⁴ There is much more to say about why these forms of agency are especially likely to be distorted or missed by philosophers. Contributing factors include ideological investments of academic philosophy, prejudices about what counts as real knowledge practices and sources of evidence, and a tendency to elevate the testimony of elite spokespersons and downgrade embedded cultural practices.

institutional blame responses. The failure to recognize how different forms of agency interact in people's lives—and especially how moral judgment and the vernaculars that prop it up are contested—makes theorists more likely to make attributions of moral responsibility that are desensitized to the actual conditions of those lives.²⁵

Thinking agency across its multiple dimensions is useful because it makes possible for us to put back together the strands artificially held apart by the inheritance of different fields of philosophy, and to recognize how those strands are integrated in people's lives.²⁶ Epistemic agency under oppression can feed into political agency, and it is likely necessary for collective political action—including collective action to contest and redefine the moral vernacular of a society. This might not just be savvy ways of reasoning or gaining knowledge and developing interpretations, but also learning to recognize alternative sources of information, learning about what matters to oneself and one's communities, and finding ways to convert personal or collective epistemic resources into sources of power and action (see, e.g., Ward, 2023). Theorists need to pay attention to a wide range of life projects, actions, relationships, survival strategies, knowledge practices, and political interventions from below, and work to articulate how these areas of life integrate different forms and faces of agency.²⁷ This provides a good reason to examine agency using non-ideal theory, and it is useful independent of concerns about respecting or affirming the agency of oppressed people. Rather, both descriptive adequacy and political efficacy demand such attention.²⁸

Author Bio

Caleb Ward is a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Hamburg. He has published on sexual agency and sexual objectification in *Palgrave Handbook of Sexual Ethics*, as well on the epistemic and political bases for agency in the work of black feminist poet and theorist Audre Lorde (in *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* and *Hypatia*). His first book, on

²⁵ Debates over the putative obligations of victims of oppression are instructive to this point. See for example the arguments against Elizabeth Harman's claim that survivors of sexual violation have special moral obligations to report their experiences (Kukla and Herbert, 2018; see also Alcoff, 2021). Vargas (2018) joins Kukla and Herbert (2018) and Timpe (2019) in using a "moral ecology" approach to ameliorate the problem of assigning moral responsibility under oppression.

²⁶ Simpson (2021, chap. 3) offers one explicit attempt to do this.

²⁷ One promising avenue for this analysis is through dialogue between transnational feminist, anticolonial, and black feminist traditions. Black feminists in particular have articulated how everyday actions and practices of care can contribute to communal practices of self-definition that build agency (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1990; Morrison, 1993/1973), which then creates a basis for solidarity and political collaboration in pursuit of shared interests and values. Audre Lorde (1984) provides one account of how this takes place through feeling, poetry, and the erotic (see discussion in Ward, 2020). More work is needed to explore interfaces between non-ideal accounts of agency and black feminist social critique.

²⁸ Note that this claim is still compatible with Khader's deflationary approach to agency in feminist politics: even if Khader is right that agency need not be the central normative foundation for feminist politics, the foregoing still provides good reason to study agency under oppression.

Lorde's black feminist social and political philosophy, is under contract with Oxford University Press.

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