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Feminist Metaphilosophy

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A NEW AMELIORATIVE APPROACH TO MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

by Michelle Ciurria*

Abstract. *Sally Haslanger identifies three standard philosophical approaches – conceptual, descriptive, and ameliorative – and defends an ameliorative analysis of race and gender as the most effective at addressing social injustice. In this paper, I assign three influential theories of moral responsibility to these categories, and I defend the ameliorative approach as the most justice-conducive. But I argue that existing ameliorative accounts of responsibility are not ameliorative enough – they do not adequately address social injustice. I propose a new ameliorative model that defines ordinary responsibility as part of a political apparatus of power that polices and enforces oppressive norms. And I argue that we should create new, counterhegemonic discourses about responsibility through collective political resistance.*

Keywords. *Moral Responsibility; Oppression; Social Justice; Eliminativism; Strawson*

1. Introduction

Metaphilosophy investigates the aims and methods of philosophy. Feminist metaphilosophers are critical of traditional methods that depoliticize and naturalize key concepts (like knowledge and autonomy), presenting them as individual capacities rather than effects of apparatuses of power. (Autonomy, for example, is not simply an individual property or capacity, but a privilege that is denied women in patriarchal conditions). Feminists have proposed various alternatives to the classic approach, one of which is Sally Haslanger’s influential tripartite system, which identifies three distinct modes of analysis: (a) the conceptual method, which inquires into ‘our’ shared understanding of a concept F; (b) the descriptive method, which investigates the concept F that our shared

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vocabulary tracks; and (c) the ameliorative method, which inquires into the point of having a concept F at all. Haslanger believes that each method can be useful in its own right, but she defends an ameliorative analysis (specifically of race and gender) because it draws attention to social injustice by defining the target concept in reference to a specific type of injustice (e.g., racism). Race and gender, for example, are not natural, individual properties of persons, but class positions in hierarchies of power. This definition brings into relief the *systems of oppression* that construct race/gender as classes, which must be eliminated in order for race/gender to lose their significance as sites of oppression. The central focus is not genetics, biology, or common usage, but broader social matrixes that give rise to race/gender politics.

The ameliorative method is favoured by many feminist philosophers and critical race theorists due to its orientation towards social (in)justice, and has been applied to such concepts as disability, autonomy, knowledge, and prejudice. To give an example, Kate Manne argues in *Down Girl* that misogyny is not, as most people assume, essentially a property of persons, but rather «primarily a property of social systems or environments as a whole, in which women will tend to face hostility of various kinds because they are women in a man's world (i.e., a patriarchy), who are held to be failing to live up to patriarchal standards»¹. This analysis defines misogyny as an effect of political systems, and something that can only (or most effectively) be eliminated by resistance to those systems. By highlighting the politics (rather than the individual/psychological manifestations) of misogyny, Manne enables us to identify and resist the roots of misogyny: sociopolitical and institutional arrangements.

There are currently several ameliorative approaches to responsibility on offer (which I will discuss shortly), but I worry that they are not ameliorative enough, by which I mean that, though they address injustice, they do not adequately conceptualize or appreciate the *structural* nature of injustice. Before advancing this argument, however, I will outline the three philosophical

¹ K. Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 33.

approaches identified by Haslanger, and explain why she favours the ameliorative one with respect to race and gender. Then I will use Haslanger's system to categorize three influential accounts of moral responsibility (to the best of my ability). I will contend that (1) 'eliminativism' (the view that there is no such thing as moral responsibility) is a conceptual approach, (2) 'quality of will theory' (the idea that responsibility practices should track an agent's attitudes or evaluative states) is also primarily conceptual but with descriptive elements, and (3) 'agency-cultivation theory' (the idea that responsibility practices should enhance agency) is an ameliorative approach. These are not clear-cut or uncontroversial distinctions because, as Haslanger notes, each theory can involve multiple levels of analysis. Nonetheless, I think that these three responsibility theories fall most comfortably into these distinct categorizations. After defending this classification, I will argue that existing versions of ameliorativism, which is the approach that I favour, are not ameliorative enough, as they do not acknowledge the *structural and systemic* nature of the social injustice. Partly because of this oversight, they explicitly deny that the responsibility system needs to be radically transformed. (Instead, they hold that it should be *moderately* revised or 'tweaked'). I propose a *transformative* model of ameliorative responsibility, which seeks to *radically change* the 'responsibility system' (within which we exchange moral emotions and judgments of fault).

2. *Three Approaches*

Sally Haslanger² identifies three standard philosophical approaches: (a) the conceptual method, which inquires into our shared understanding of a concept F; (b) the descriptive method, which seeks to identify paradigm cases of the concept F; and (c) the ameliorative method, which inquires into the point of having a concept F at all. She gives the example of the word *tardy*, which in her child's school officially refers to arriving after the 8:25 a.m.

² S. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, New York-London, Oxford University Press, 2012.

morning bell, but is enforced differently by different teachers; one teacher in particular marks students as tardy only if they arrive after the end of first period, not if they miss the bell. There are, then, two competing uses of ‘tardy’: the ‘manifest concept’, which denotes ‘after 8:25 a.m.’, and the ‘operative concept’, which denotes ‘after first period for Teacher X, but after 8:25 a.m. for all other teachers’. If we are trying to decide how we *should* define tardy in light of our shared goals, then we are interested in a third idea, the ‘target concept’. On Haslanger’s taxonomy, (a) conceptual analysis aims at the manifest concept of a term, (b) descriptive analysis aims at the operative concept, and (c) ameliorative analysis aims at the target concept. As such, the conceptualist will claim that school policy defines the meaning of ‘tardy’, the descriptivist will say that ordinary practice defines ‘tardy’, and the ameliorativist will seek a definition that serves the interests of teachers, students, parents and guardians, and the broader community.

Haslanger applies this taxonomy to the concept of race. She says that the conceptualist «seek[s] an articulation of our concept[...] of race»³, typically using the method of reflective equilibrium to balance competing intuitions and beliefs. The conceptualist might see a race as a property of a population with certain morphological features in common, for example. The descriptivist attempts to discern *which* populations our racial vocabularies track – which populations, for example, have morphological features X. The ameliorativist, in contrast, tries to define race in terms that advance social justice – justice, perhaps, for those marked as having morphological features X. As we can see, these methods are not completely distinct, since understanding what we mean by ‘racial group F’ may inform our understanding of which individuals belong to F, which may in turn inform our understanding of what we take justice for group F to look like. That said, conceptualists, descriptivists, and ameliorativists can have very different manifest concepts in mind (e.g., one can be thinking of groups with shared morphological features while another may be thinking of groups with shared social status), and, thus, they can pursue different goals or objectives on that basis (e.g., identifying

³ Ivi, p. 223.

morphologically distinct populations vs. promoting justice for groups with shared interests).

At first glance, it may seem as if conceptual and descriptive approaches naturalize and essentialize race by defining it as a biological kind or fixed essence (as most laypeople understand it), but this isn't necessarily the case. Haslanger points out that some non-ameliorativists define race as a social kind, and try to debunk and demystify this construct. Thus, each theory can be politically useful in its own right. When it comes to race, conceptualists tend to argue either that race as commonly understood (as a natural kind) has no referent and is therefore a myth⁴, or that the concept of race can be salvaged if we revise it to fit with emerging perspectives in science and philosophy. Descriptivists try to identify members of designated racial groups. And Ameliorativists define race by reference to hierarchies of power (as Haslanger does). These approaches are all political, but only the ameliorative one links race with political hierarchies that need to be ameliorated, rather than (merely) debunking and/or revising the common understanding and classification of race. Ameliorativism, that is, specifically emphasizes *broader power structures*.

The advantage of the ameliorative method, says Haslanger, is that it recognizes that race only exists within a historically-contingent apparatus of power, and can only be eliminated if and when we disestablish that apparatus. We cannot eliminate race merely by demystifying or disavowing the lay concept, or by showing that no morphologically-categorized groups align with, say, census categories. Ameliorativism enjoins us to mobilize against the apparatuses of power that construct race as a class position, which is a necessary precursor to eliminating the concept of race itself. Ameliorativism, then, resembles eliminativism in its aims, but differs in its means: it doesn't simply debunk a folk concept, but situates the concept in relevant hierarchies of power – hierarchies that need to be dismantled in order to abolish the concept in

⁴ E.g., K.A. Appiah, *Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections*, in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, ed. by A. Appiah and A. Gutmann, Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 1996, and N. Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

question. For Haslanger, the solution to racism, and to race, is not merely linguistic and conceptual resistance, but social transformation; «when justice is achieved», she explains, «there will no longer be white women (there will no longer be men or women, whites or members of any other race)», at which point «we – or more realistically, our descendants – won't need the concepts of race or gender to describe our current situation»⁵. Race, then, is a real site of oppression and resistance, and a post-racial reality is a hypothetical future that we can only (as yet) imagine. Bringing it about will require international solidarity and intergenerational resistance.

We see a similar form of ameliorativism in Moya Bailey's treatment of 'misogynoir', which she defines as the interlocking oppressions of racism and sexism directed at Black women, non-binary, and gender-variant folks. While Bailey wishes that misogynoir could be eradicated, she adopts the more realistic goal of transforming representations of Black women and sexual minorities through «digital alchemy..., a praxis designed to create better representations for those most marginalized, through the implementation of networks of care beyond the boundaries of the digital from which it springs»⁶. Bailey particularly favours «generative digital alchemy, [which] speaks to a desire or want for new types of representation» of Blackness, femininity, and sexual variance⁷. She pursues a transformative *rather than* an eliminativist agenda because she recognizes that eliminating misogynoir requires a greater level of collaboration and cooperation than we can realistically expect:

While I hope for the eradication of misogynoir, I realize that a world without misogynoir requires more than the labor of Black women and Black nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant folks to be achieved. We can transform our relationship to misogynoir and transform the images and

⁵ Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, p. 266.

⁶ M. Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*, New York, New York University Press, 2021, p. 23.

⁷ Ivi, p. 24.

material consequences of misogynoir even as we are not the ones who create it. The transformation of misogynoir through the creation of new possibilities is an essential practice of the digital alchemy these communities engender⁸.

The ameliorative approach recognizes the (for now) ineradicability of systems of oppression, and asks us to work within those systems to challenge and change hegemonic concepts and representations, creating new ways of interfacing with such concepts. While we cannot eliminate misogynoir (for example), we can resist misogynoiristic representations, and create new representations of race and gender that create existential, epistemic, and institutional possibilities for marginalized Black subjects.

Haslanger similarly wants to transform the concepts of race and gender to create new, counterhegemonic spaces and concepts. Accordingly, she defines race and gender (roughly) as follows:

A group is racialized if its members have, or seem to have, bodily features associated with certain ancestral regions that mark that group as subordinate (Black, Asian, etc.) or privileged (White) in a salient context (e.g., the prevailing white supremacist culture).

A person is gendered as a woman if that person has, or seems to have, bodily features associated with reproduction that mark her as a target for subordination relative to men.

These definitions recognize the reality of race and gender as sites of oppression, but aim to transform these concepts by identifying them as contingent artefacts of hierarchies of power.

Although Haslanger's take on race and gender is well-known, ameliorative approaches to responsibility are relatively new, and don't necessarily bill themselves *as* ameliorative. Notable examples include Iris Marion Young's social connection model of

⁸ Ivi, p. 27.

responsibility⁹, which discusses the importance of ameliorating injustice, but does not advertise itself as an ameliorative account, and Manuel Vargas' agency-enhancing model, which doesn't discuss amelioration at all, but is committed to (what I would define as) the ameliorative aim of engineering a better 'moral ecology', or system of moral norms and relationships. Most approaches to responsibility aren't ameliorative at all, but instead accept, or try to systemize and reform, our 'commonsense' understanding of responsibility, thereby preserving the core of lay morality. Or, in the case of eliminativism, they try to debunk the folk understanding and eliminate responsibility altogether.

In what follows, I will explain in more detail why I take three dominant theories to fall under the conceptualist and descriptivist headings, and then offer a critique of existing ameliorative views – which is the method that I favour – arguing that they are insufficiently sensitive to structural injustice. To be clear, I am not saying that conceptual and descriptive approaches have nothing to offer, but merely that a well-crafted ameliorativism may appeal to the growing number of philosophers who are committed to advancing social justice through their theoretical projects. Indeed, many non-ameliorative approaches contain *ameliorative elements*, even if they do not fully embrace a thoroughgoing ameliorative methodology, and these elements should appeal to the same audience.

2.1. Eliminativism

Several prominent philosophers have argued that there is no such thing as moral responsibility because our ordinary concept of responsibility doesn't refer to anything in the real world. This is akin to the eliminativist position on race, which Haslanger describes as conceptualist analysis. Appiah, for one, has argued that there is nothing that corresponds to race as most people understand it, so we should stop acting as if race were a valid construct. Haslanger contends that eliminativism isn't as politically efficacious as ameliorativism because it attempts to modify our linguistic practice without addressing the hierarchies of power that produce

⁹ I.M. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

this practice, and the racial concepts that it tracks. Disavowing the ordinary concept of race in and of itself will not eliminate racial oppression or stop racists from using the disavowed concept. We can apply the same kind of critique to eliminativism about moral responsibility: eliminating the ordinary concept of responsibility will not eliminate underlying power structures.

The most prolific responsibility eliminativist, to my knowledge, is Bruce Waller, the author of *Against Moral Responsibility* (2011) and *The Stubborn System of Moral Responsibility* (2015). Waller argues that we have many working notions of responsibility, but they are all illusory because they all fail to track anything in the natural, nonspiritual world. He asks,

Why this stubborn persistence of belief in moral responsibility – a belief as prevalent among philosophers as among Hume’s «vulgar» and the contemporary «folk»? It is perhaps more understandable among the folk, many of whom continue to believe in the gods and miracles that have traditionally provided the best support for moral responsibility [...]. But philosophers who adhere to a thoroughly naturalistic, nonmiraculous worldview remain firm in their commitment to moral responsibility, while standing amid the debris of so many failed attempts to *justify* belief in moral responsibility¹⁰. (Emphasis in original)

Thus, Waller takes both pre-theoretic (folk) and theoretically-informed (philosophical) concepts of responsibility to be equally untenable. There simply is no such thing as moral responsibility in any sense:

Whatever one thinks of the rich variety of [...] arguments in defense of moral responsibility and their comparative strengths and weaknesses, one thing is clear: The

¹⁰ B.N. Waller, *The Stubborn System of Moral Responsibility*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2015, p. 4.

philosophical belief in moral responsibility is much stronger than the arguments for moral responsibility¹¹.

Why do even the most astute and perceptive philosophers continue to believe in the ‘stubborn system’ of responsibility? Waller says that we have an evolutionarily deep ‘strike-back’ impulse that triggers us to blame and resent others. This impulse is rationalized in the average mind by a largely-unconscious just-world bias, along with a strident over-confidence in the power of human reason, in spite of the fact that, like simpler organisms, we are not particularly reasonable. If we were more thoughtful, perhaps we would realize that our strike-back emotions are animalistic impulses that add more suffering and injustice to the world.

We can see that Waller’s theory of moral responsibility resembles Appiah’s theory of race insofar as it debunks and provides an error theory for the standard concept of responsibility. Thus, it appears to be a conceptualist approach. It says that we should stop believing in responsibility and acting as if it were real. And we can also clearly see why Waller’s approach isn’t ameliorative, even though it critiques ordinary moral practice. Waller conceptualizes the urge to blame as an evolutionarily-ancient strike-back impulse, which predates contemporary apparatuses of power. This is a de-politicizing, naturalizing, and personalizing approach to responsibility, which neglects and discounts (as opposed to foregrounding) the *political construction* of responsibility as a system of practices that enforce hierarchies of power. For Waller, the strike-back roots of responsibility-holding predate contemporary political institutions, and even just-world bias is an ancient, unconscious impulse, dating back to before Biblical times. This explanation overlooks the connections between responsibility and contemporary apparatuses of power – apparatuses that, for example, racialize certain groups (Black, Indigenous) as criminal and deviant, while upholding others (White) as presumptively praiseworthy, honest, and forgivable. These biases have roots in post-industrial capitalism and the specific racial, sexual, and ableist dimensions of

¹¹ Ivi, p. 5.

neoliberal politics¹². In contrast, most theorists think that, in traditional (Indigenous) societies, responsibility was allocated far more fairly, as such societies were «highly egalitarian [...]. Everyone knew each other, and maintaining relationships was critical to survival of the individual and the group»¹³. The distinctly oppressive nature of responsibility in the liberal west is a fairly modern invention.

The ameliorative approach sees modern responsibility practices as oppressive social techniques that can only be changed through social engineering. They are not ahistorical evolutionary impulses. While blame and praise *can* be reflexive and automatic, this is because the apparatuses of power that shape social interactions (including blaming and praising) are so pervasive as to be nearly invisible. We take them for granted and adopt a stance of false consciousness, living as if our moral intuitions were essentially just. To change our practices, then, we need to change social systems.

While Waller certainly does acknowledge that responsibility is a harmful (and stubborn) system, he only goes so far as to debunk the manifest concept of responsibility: he doesn't analyze responsibility as an enforcement branch of an oppressive apparatus of power – one that punishes deviations from hegemonic norms by designating these actions as 'bad' and 'blameworthy'. (For example, simply being poor in a neoliberal framework is construed as 'blameworthy'). This is why I classify Waller's account as conceptual, not ameliorative. A true ameliorativist would embed responsibility in the modern political matrixes that produce and shape ordinary social interactions, and would direct attention to the political dynamics that govern responsibility – specifically, the social contracts that define certain groups as good and credible, and that elevate the moral norms and customs associated with those groups to the level of religious faith.

¹² See Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* for a thorough exploration of the modern construction of racial categories and concepts through the capitalist mode of production, which operates through genocide, slavery, and violence.

¹³ B.F. Malle, S. Guglielmo, and A.E. Monroe, *A Theory of Blame*, «Psychological Inquiry», XXV (2), 2014, pp. 147-186, p. 172.

While most philosophers are not willing to embrace full-blooded eliminativism, some have argued that we are *less* responsible than we tend to think, which is in the same ballpark. This camp includes Neil Levy¹⁴ and John Doris¹⁵, who argue that we can't be fully responsible for our actions because of the role that luck and subtle situational influences play in our character development and personal choices. Like Waller's eliminativism, these skeptical accounts fail to fully appreciate the apparatuses of power that construct the responsibility system: the norms that decide what types of behaviours counts as praiseworthy/blameworthy and what kinds of people are considered (presumptively) good/bad by virtue of their social class. In our society, owning wealth is considered 'good' according to neoliberal principles, and, as a result, groups that have been economically marginalized and exploited (Black, Indigenous, etc.) are seen as 'lazy' and 'selfish'; meanwhile, exploiters are seen as praiseworthy 'innovators' and job-creators, whose industriousness and Puritan work ethic serve society and the public good. This colonialist narrative, and corresponding value judgments, are rooted in modern capitalist systems. The 'luck' theory misleadingly designates capitalist owners as 'lucky' due to their material privileges, ignoring the destructive, imperialist role that they play in the lives of exploited minorities. It designates oppressed groups as 'unlucky' rather than victims of exploitation and genocide. That is, the myth of luck erases intentionally constructed systems of oppression, mischaracterizing oppressors as 'lucky' (rather than exploitative), and designates their victims as 'unlucky' (instead of exploited). Capitalism did not emerge by accident and is not maintained by mystical, non-agentic forces, such as 'luck' and 'situational influences'. Intentional agents orchestrated modern systems of exploitation, as well as the value system that justify them.

¹⁴ N. Levy, *Hard Luck: How Luck Undermines Free Will and Moral Responsibility*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

¹⁵ J.M. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

2.2. Quality-of-Will View

‘Quality of will’ theory is a different form of conceptualism, though it also emphasizes paradigm cases of responsibility, and therefore (putatively) crosses into descriptivism. These theorists try to find paradigm cases of responsibility and bring them into alignment through reflective equilibrium, constructing a more coherent definition. One of the exemplars of this method is Peter Strawson’s classic paper *Freedom and Resentment*¹⁶, which described moral responsibility as an interpersonal practice in which people exchange the «reactive attitudes» of «gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings», in response to a moral agent’s «quality of will»¹⁷. Negative reactive attitudes like resentment are appropriate in response to negative qualities of will like hostility, while positive reactive attitudes like gratitude are fitting in response to positive gestures like kindness. Strawson developed his theory by reflecting on what people generally take responsibility to be, and identifying intuitive excuses and exempting conditions that limit responsibility and blameworthiness. Strawson believed that the reactive attitudes are natural and even necessary human impulses, which we wouldn’t want to live without, and couldn’t fully suppress even if we tried.

His theory is conceptual/descriptive because it attempts to describe responsibility in systematic terms by looking at paradigm cases and ruling out putative counterexamples (e.g., children). It is not ameliorative because it doesn’t even mention, let alone center, oppression and injustice. Instead, it treats the reactive attitudes as natural, universal reflexes that existed prior to contemporary political arrangements. Strawson takes our ordinary moral practice to be, for the most part, fitting, valuable, and truth-tracking, which completely ignores patent injustices like racial scapegoating, cultural homophobia, and institutionalized ableism. Strawson seemed unaware of the apparatuses of power that allowed (and still allow)

¹⁶ P.F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, 1962. Retrieved from: http://www.filosofia.unimi.it/zucchi/NuoviFile/Freedom_and_Resentment.pdf. Strawson references are from an unpaginated electronic document.

¹⁷ Ivi.

the ruling classes to designate certain norms as ‘fitting’ and certain groups as ‘good’, creating a moral hegemony that maintains capitalistic dynamics of privilege and oppression. Because he ignores these asymmetries of power, he misrepresents the responsibility system as natural, apolitical, and relatively fair.

Strawson’s first mistake was his decision to use ‘commonsense’ as the starting point for his analysis of responsibility. As a 20th-Century White man, *his* commonsense was the commonsense of the privileged (neo)liberal majority, who were largely insulated from structural injustice. As Robin Dembroff and several colleagues¹⁸ have attested, the ‘commonsense’ of mainstream philosophy, even today, is the shared ideology «of the culturally powerful» (who make the rules), whereas «the commonsense of the racialized, poor, queer, transgender, or disabled are considered philosophically irrelevant ‘ideology’, ‘activism’, or ‘delusion’»¹⁹. The ‘commonsense’ of the 1960s was even more biased than today’s academic consensus, since the academy was even less diverse and inclusive than now. Hence, reasoning from ‘commonsense intuitions’ (when this tacitly denotes the norms of the political center) is a non-ameliorative strategy that reinforces centrist dogma. This method is fundamentally at odds with an ameliorative approach, which precisely seeks to shed light on centrist biases.

Because Strawson used this mode of analysis, he drew a number of problematic inferences. For example, he held that people can be excused from blame if they are amenable to «such [excuses] as ‘He didn’t mean to’, ‘He hadn’t realized’, ‘He didn’t know’; and also all those which might give occasion for the use of the phrase ‘He couldn’t help it’»²⁰. Not only did Strawson use exclusively masculine pronouns (as per the cissexist norm of the time), he didn’t notice or acknowledge that these excuses are seen as more credible

¹⁸ E.g., T. M. Bettcher, *What Is Trans Philosophy?*, «Hypatia», XXXIV (4), 2019, pp. 644-667; N. Scheman, & D. T. Meyers, *Queering the center by centering the queer*, in *Sissies and Tomboys: gender nonconformity and homosexual childhood*, ed. by Matthew Rottneck, New York, New York University Press, 1999, pp. 58-103.

¹⁹ R. Dembroff, *Cisgender commonsense and philosophy’s transgender trouble*. «Transgender Studies Quarterly», VII (3), 2020, pp. 399-406, p. 5.

²⁰ Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*.

when uttered by privileged White men compared to other groups, on account of sympathy bias ('himpathy') and epistemic injustice. As Lorraine Code and other social epistemologists have noted, privileged groups enjoy testimonial privilege, and can therefore wield excuses with more credibility than others. Strawson's naturalistic lens doesn't allow for this kind of analysis.

In addition, Strawson held that people can be exempted from blame if «[suffering from] insanity, or other less extreme forms of psychological disorder»²¹ – conditions that were, at the time, seen as morally incapacitating. But today, many disability activists reject the labels of 'insanity' and 'disorder,' as well as the presumption that neurodivergent people are morally incapable or infantile. These assumptions are, once again, the result of Strawson's political privilege and uncritical reliance on (stubborn) centrist intuitions.

Michael McKenna is a modern-day Strawsonian who has refined Strawson's theory by specifying that responsibility is a conversational practice governed by «pertinent social norms of conversation»²², which are supposed to be transparent and intuitive to fluent conversationalists (i.e., almost everyone). This is still a non-ameliorative approach because it takes social norms to be relatively fair, equitable, and accessible to native English speakers, rather than controlled by elite groups that have privileged access to 'proper' usages and meanings. In reality, dominant norms and expectations are designed to punish and police oppressed groups and maintain architectures of power and control. In his more recent work (2018), McKenna addresses these asymmetries of power, but he doesn't change his original definition of responsibility (as a conversational practice) so as to recognize the connections between responsibility and apparatuses of power. A true ameliorative approach would draw a closer connection between responsibility and power.

²¹ Ivi.

²² M. McKenna, *Conversation & Responsibility*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 196.

2.3. Agency-Cultivation View

The agency-cultivation view is an ameliorative approach. It doesn't (just) try to systematize intuitions and commonsense thinking about responsibility, but (first and foremost) asks what we want responsibility to do for us. Commonsense and systematicity, then, are secondary to an overarching political interest. For Haslanger – and myself – this interest is social justice, specifically transformative justice. Manuel Vargas is similarly interested in using responsibility to advance a specific goal – namely, sensitizing people to moral reasons and improving society. On his view, if someone is insensitive to moral reasons, we shouldn't blame the person, as doing so has no point. We should blame people *only if* doing so helps to engineer better moral agents.

Jules Holroyd (2018), who is also an ameliorativist, argues that Vargas' view is not sufficiently ameliorative because it excludes too many people from the remit of moral reasoning and enhancement – those who may not be sensitive to a specific reason in the moment, but could *become* sensitive to that reason under different circumstances or across a range of circumstances over time. Holroyd says that we ought to be able to blame such people because doing so may enhance or 'responsibilize' these individuals in the long run. They could perhaps achieve sensitivity over a longer period of socialization, through multiple interactions and various experiences. Holroyd's argument shows that certain ameliorative approaches are better than others, because they're better able to advance a designated goal, such as engineering agency.

But is Holroyd's own view *sufficiently* ameliorative? Her view is an example of ameliorativism because it embeds responsibility in 'the moral ecology' and seeks to promote a specific goal. But to my mind, it doesn't go far enough. It is still too ahistorical and individualistic to effectively address apparatuses of power in the moral ecology. It specifically has two flaws.

First, the agency-cultivation view places too much emphasis on individual agents and dyadic encounters, diverting attention from apparatuses of power that transcend individuals. In this regard, the view individualizes and personalizes (what is essentially) a sociopolitical problem – the construction of asymmetries of

power between groups. The personal focus distracts from apparatuses of power that create political inequalities. It leaves unanalyzed the political arrangements that allow the privileged to define ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and wield blame and praise more effectively.

A second, related issue is that the agency-cultivation view mischaracterizes injustice as the result of psychological deficits in wrongdoers (who need to be ‘morally enhanced’), as opposed to a *structural and systemic* feature of the moral ecology, engendered by contemporary apparatuses of power that designate certain groups as problems and threats. The agent-centric view prioritizes the personal over the political, which, according to classic feminist principles, isn’t the most effective way of advancing social justice. Feminists have long held that ‘the personal is political’ and politics should be a central locus of analysis in moral and interpersonal life.

In fact, Vargas adopts the Strawsonian assumption that «common sense is mostly reliable, or at any rate, reliable enough that our theories can help themselves to claims about the nature of responsibility, at least partly in light of coherence with ordinary responsibility-coherent practices and convictions»²³. That is, ordinary responsibility practices are generally acceptable (although the underlying reasons for those practices may be incoherent). For this reason, John Doris refers to Vargas’ approach as «conservatively revisionary»²⁴, since it attempts to justify and preserve the bulk of our ordinary (centrist, neoliberal) practices, while providing a novel justification for those practices, i.e., they allegedly enhance agency. The problem with the conservative side of this analysis is that it dismisses Dembroff’s claim about the alignment of commonsense intuitions and beliefs with conservative dogma. Ordinary moral practice is essentially cissexist, transphobic, and racist, and not good evidence for moral claims.

Holroyd does not explicitly challenge this conservative bias. In fact, she worries that Vargas’ view is *too* revisionary because it defies the commonsense (Strawsonian) intuition that, «for the most part, we interact with each other on the assumption that we are

²³ M. Vargas, *Building Better Beings*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 1.

²⁴ J.M. Doris, *Symposium on An Intersectional Feminist Theory of Moral Responsibility by Michelle Ciarria*, «Syndicate» (<https://syndicate.network/>), forthcoming.

morally responsible agents»²⁵. But do we? In conditions of structural injustice, many people do not enjoy the privilege of being presumed responsible until proven otherwise. Disabled folks, for example, are generally presumed non-responsible until they prove themselves capable of ‘adult moral reasoning’, and this bias permeates the philosophical literature (including Strawson’s work). Black people are, as critical race theorists have shown, presumed subhuman and uncivilized as a group, which explains why they are overincarcerated, overpoliced, and disproportionately subjected to family separation. Holroyd’s assumption doesn’t square with the reality that being presumed responsible is a privilege, generally withheld from disenfranchised groups.

To be more precise, I should note that the presumption of non-agency in oppressed groups, ironically, often goes along with a presumption of blameworthiness, because structures of oppression erect a system of *double-binds* that designate the target group as *both* subhuman (uncivilized, arational) *and* endowed with a predatory, pernicious kind of agency (rapists, criminals, troublemakers). As Marilyn Frye (1983) has observed, oppressive cultures give rise to double-binds that limit the options available to vulnerable groups to a very few, all of which are punishable. Thus, oppressed groups are presumed *either* non-agentic *or* blameworthy – or both at the same time – as a way of ‘keeping them in their place’. It is a mistake to think that most people are assumed to be (Kantian) *moral* agents, endowed with a *dignified* kind of agency. Many are assumed to be either subhuman or a deviant kind of human.

The issue with the agency-enhancement view, then, is that it is too conservative in its analysis of ordinary practice, and this is (partly) because it does not fully come to grips with social injustice, as an artefact of the social contract under capitalism. According to post-Rawlsian (radical) contract theorists like Carole Pateman, Charles Mills, and Stacy Simplican, the social contract in the liberal west – which shapes our ordinary practices – distributes rights and

²⁵ J.D. Holroyd, *Two Ways of Socializing Moral Responsibility*, in *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, ed. by K. Hutchison, K. MacKenzie and M. Oshana, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 137-162, p. 151.

responsibilities unfairly, allowing privileged groups to control social interactions. As Mills puts it,

Liberalism [which reigns in the contemporary U.S.] has historically been [and is] predominantly a racial liberalism, in which conceptions of personhood and resulting schedules of rights, duties, and government responsibilities have all been racialized. And the contract, correspondingly, has really been a racial one, an agreement among white contractors to subordinate and exploit nonwhite non-contractors for white benefit²⁶.

This builds on Pateman's earlier claim (1988) that the social contract is a patriarchal one that privileges men and masculinity, and Simplican's claim (2015) that the contract is an ableist one that privileges nondisabled people and ableist culture. The racial-patriarchal-ableist contract – or the «domination contract» for short²⁷ – ensures that responsibilities and responsibility-governing norms are constructed and enforced unfairly and to the advantage of an elite few. Under the domination contract, conceptions of rights and responsibilities are designed to uphold what bell hooks calls «an imperialist white supremacist [ableist] capitalist patriarch[all]» order²⁸. The privileged are seen as responsible *for* creating an enlightened and civilized society, and as responsible *to* continue expanding on this legacy, fulfilling the promise of manifest destiny and Eurocentric domination. Meanwhile, non-contractors – who are exploited under the domination contract – are seen as responsible *for* failing to achieve the same level of civility and humanity, and as responsible *to* assimilate into the capitalist order, even though material disadvantages are foisted upon them by unjust structures like the racial wealth gap, ableist architectures, epistemic injustice, and so on. The domination contract ensures that ordinary

²⁶ C.W. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 29.

²⁷ Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, p. 36.

²⁸ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 128.

practice will, in general, treat contractors as competent, praiseworthy, and forgivable, while treating non-contractors (e.g., racialized, disabled, gender-variant people) as incompetent, blameworthy, and unforgivable. Responsibility practices, in effect, *enforce the norms of the domination contract*, in part by tracking the stereotypes created by that contract. These practices maintain the established order by *systematically morally policing* oppressed groups, preventing them from enjoying the same freedom from moral scrutiny afforded to the privileged. Because non-contractors are defined as moral outsiders, they are constantly policed.

This means that ‘tweaking’ or conservatively revising commonsense morality is not sufficient to achieve a truly just and equitable culture. We need to radically transform social norms and practices. Eliminativism is closer to the mark than the Strawsonian view: Waller, at least, realizes that the responsibility system, as it currently exists, is fundamentally harmful and unfair. But he favours elimination rather than transformation and amelioration. The agency-enhancement view is not an adequate alternative because it does not focus attention on the apparatuses of power – the moral panopticon – that systemically polices and punishes certain groups. A transformative ameliorativism must recognize that oppression isn’t merely a glitch in the system: it *is* the system. The social contract is fundamentally unjust. We need to rewrite it, partly by using responsibility in resistant ways (e.g., blaming exploitative billionaires), and partly by addressing broader institutions (e.g., taxing the rich). The solution will resemble Mills’ solution to the domination contract: (a) recognizing oppression as central to the making of the liberal west (including responsibility), and (b) rethinking the categories, assumptions, and frameworks central to liberalism (including those pertaining to responsibility).

3. *Ameliorativism Transformed*

What would it take to make the agency-cultivation model *as ameliorative* as Haslanger’s theory of race/gender? My objection to the agency-enhancement view is that it does not adequately reckon with the structural nature of oppression, as codified in the

domination contract. On my view, the responsibility system – and the judgments and attitudes internal to it – enforces and upholds the asymmetric and oppressive terms of the domination contract, ensuring that privileged people remain ‘on top’. To give a few examples of how this works in practice, Blackness is mythologized as «dangerous, criminal,» «pathological»²⁹, hypersexual, and ‘unrapable’³⁰, whereas Whiteness is upheld as innocent, rational, authoritative, and worthy of forgiveness and ‘second chances’. Femininity and femaleness are coded as «emotional», «irrational»³¹, untrustworthy and pathological³², while masculinity and maleness are associated with rationality, credibility, and knowledge. Disabled people are seen as «impaired» and incapacitated³³, «tragic overcomers»³⁴ or perpetual children, while nondisabled people are designated as ‘competent’, ‘reliable’, and ‘lucky’. These cultural stereotypes make oppressed groups susceptible to censure, blame, resentment, and other negative attitudes and judgments.

More specifically, the reactive attitudes (outside of counter-hegemonic spaces) tend to track and enforce these stereotypes by policing and penalizing those designated as irrational, pathological, and impaired, while rewarding those designated as rational, credible, and innocent. Frye explains how these moral attitudes erect and enforce «double-binds», or «situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation»³⁵. Women are either ‘frigid’ or ‘loose’; Black people are either ‘savages’ or criminals; disabled people are either

²⁹ T.J. Curry, *The Man-not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2017, pp. 237, 267.

³⁰ See bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, New York-Abingdon, Routledge, 2015 [1981].

³¹ Manne, *Down Girl*, p. 101.

³² B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York, WW Norton & Company, 1963.

³³ S. Tremain, *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2016, p. 96.

³⁴ E. Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 139.

³⁵ M. Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, Trumansburg (NY), Crossing Press, 1983, p. 2.

burdensome or spoiled. Both sides of the double-bind justify reactions of suspicion, resentment, hostility, blame, and punishment. Consequently, oppressed groups are blamed and punished not merely for what they do, but for who they are (according to cultural stereotypes) – that is, they are punished *no matter what they do*. Traditional accounts of responsibility – and most contemporary ones, as well – are unable to identify the policing role that responsibility practices play in enforcing double-binds, as they fail to connect responsibility with apparatuses of power, or only do so in a weak (non-systematic) way.

A powerful ameliorative analysis should recognize the deep, systematic links between ordinary responsibility (as normally practiced in the liberal west) and apparatuses of power (as enshrined in the domination contract). Such an account might define responsibility in these terms:

Ordinary responsibility is a moral practice that generally enforces hegemonic norms (the norms of the domination contract), tracks harmful stereotypes, and creates double-binds.

There are similarities between this definition of responsibility on the one hand, and Mills' and Bailey's theories of racial liberalism and misogynoir (respectively) on the other. On Mills' analysis, racial liberalism is a social arrangement in which concepts of personhood and corresponding rights and responsibilities are racialized and used to subordinate non-White non-contractors. The ameliorative solution, he says, is to adopt a counterhegemonic, *Black radical liberalism* that recognizes the reality of white supremacy and reimagines the terms of the social contract with an eye to enfranchising racialized 'others'. On Bailey's account, misogynoir is a form of structural anti-Black racist misogyny, and the solution to this injustice is to construct 'generative' narratives, images, and media representations that open up new spaces and conceptual possibilities for Black women and sexual minorities. This is the kind of model that I want to emulate. On my definition, ordinary responsibility is part of an apparatus of power that upholds and enforces the domination contract by *systematically morally scrutinizing*

and *policing* marginalized groups (while granting the privileged relative amnesty from scrutiny and blame). The ameliorative solution is to transform responsibility into a generative, liberating social practice.

This is different from eliminativism because I am not merely debunking responsibility as it currently exists or trying to convince people not to hold others responsible. I do not think that this goal is realistic or achievable in the foreseeable future. I am suggesting that we transform our shared understanding and practice of responsibility. This involves challenging hegemonic narratives, in part by using the resources of the responsibility system itself – for example, by blaming oppressors and praising members of oppressed groups – and in part by transforming social institutions.

To give some examples of this transformative project, we can look to recent cultural trends. One of the more salient ones is the emerging criticism of rich oil barons, which includes a growing willingness to hold them responsible for their contributions (as a group) to climate change and climate injustice, in defiance of the previous neoliberal consensus that corporate executives are ‘captains of industry’ who contribute positively to society by creating wealth and jobs. Greta Thunberg is one of the environmentalists who has blamed corporate decision-makers for wilfully destroying the environment in exchange for «unimaginable amounts of money»³⁶. But prior to this, Indigenous people – who are victims of *climate racism* – were already at the forefront of environmental activism as protectors of 80% the world’s remaining biodiversity, and proponents of a decolonial ethic and way of life³⁷. Western Environmental activists are beginning to align with Indigenous politics, though they continue to focus on White activists to the exclusion of Indigenous collectives and communities.

³⁶ I. Kottasova and E. Mackintosh, *Teen activist tells Davos elite they’re to blame for climate crisis*, CNN: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/25/europe/greta-thunberg-davos-world-economic-forum-intl/index.html>

³⁷ K. Sena, *Recognizing Indigenous Peoples’ Land Interests is Critical for People and Nature*, WWF: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/recognizing-indigenous-peoples-land-interests-is-critical-for-people-and-nature>.

This points to the other side of the coin: praising historically disenfranchised and culturally marginalized groups. This includes giving praise to Indigenous communities for generations of environmental activism and sustainable politics. Another example of transformative praise can be found in the emergence of pride movements, which have empowered LGBTQIA+ and disabled people to take pride in their identities and relationships, and demand the same respect from straight and nondisabled people. These groups are refuting stigmatizing narratives that depict them as inferior, impaired, and blameworthy, and are upholding the dignity and worth of their identities, relationships, and communities.

These discursive trends are transforming the responsibility system by debunking old narratives and creating new understandings about who deserves blame and resentment and who deserves praise and gratitude. Progressive movements help to build an 'equality contract' that holds people responsible on fair and equitable terms. Resisters do not (merely) seek to 'sensitize' bad actors to moral reasons, but to transform institutions and systems that cause collective harm and distort collective moral intuitions. An effective ameliorativism must shine a light on the social narratives and political apparatuses that protect privileged groups while policing and penalizing the disenfranchised.