

Oppressive Double Binds*

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I give an account of the structure of “oppressive double binds,” the double binds that exist in virtue of oppression. I explain how these double binds both are a product of and serve to reinforce oppressive structures. The central feature of double binds, I argue, is that an agent’s own prudential good is bound up with their ability to resist oppression; double binds are choice situations where no matter what an agent does, they become a mechanism in their own oppression. A consequence is that double binds constrain an individual’s agency while leaving various dimensions of their autonomy fully intact.

I

Imagine you are an untenured professor and the only woman and person of color among the faculty in a philosophy department. You are frequently approached by students, typically women or members of other underrepresented groups, looking for mentorship and emotional support as they navigate their academic experience. While you believe this service work is valuable with a view to increasing the representation of minorities in philosophy, it is also emotionally draining and takes significant

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time away from your own research. You feel trapped. If you do this sort of mentorship work, you help diversify the field in a way that will be better for you and other members of underrepresented groups. Moreover, if you refuse to do this work, you indirectly help to maintain a status quo in which women and people of color like yourself remain dramatically underrepresented and underserved. But by doing this service work, you compromise your own research and reinforce a system where disproportionate burdens are placed on women and people of color, making them less likely to succeed in the profession.

Consider another scenario.¹ You are a Black graduate student who works on Africana thought with a view to expanding the traditional philosophical canon. However, the status quo in academic philosophy is to treat the topics and methods of Africana philosophy as marginal. You are faced with a choice between doing the sort of work that fits within the academic status quo and doing the sort of work that challenges that status quo. If you do the former, you can garner recognition and an effective platform for your research. However, your research may not effectively expand or challenge the canon, and it will reinforce the validity of the standards of the academic status quo that have thus far marginalized Africana thought. If you do the latter, you might not find a platform that reaches its intended audience, and your research will, again, not effectively expand or challenge the traditional canon.

These are examples of double binds. Double binds are ubiquitous and not just within academic philosophy. A great deal of recent political coverage has considered the various double binds facing female politicians.² There has also been renewed attention to the familiar double bind faced by people protesting police violence against Blacks.³ Philosophers have considered the double binds faced by trans women,⁴ queer

1. I'm grateful to Alexander Tolbert for discussion of this example. For a discussion of a similar bind faced by feminist philosophers, see Katharine Jenkins, "'That's Not Philosophy': Feminism, Academia and the Double Bind," *Journal of Gender Studies* 23 (2014): 262–74.

2. See, e.g., recent coverage of the "competence-charisma" double bind faced by Elizabeth Warren; Peter Beinart, "Elizabeth Warren Had Charisma, and Then She Ran for President," *Atlantic*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/elizabeth-warrens-charisma-didnt-suddenly-disappear/586690/>. See also recent coverage of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez "code-switching" in different environments; John McWhorter, "It Wasn't 'Verbal Blackface.' AOC Was Code-Switching," *Atlantic*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-code-switches-black-english/586723/>.

3. Protests that are peaceful and "law-abiding" fail to get headlines; protests that are disruptive or that involve the destruction of property are dismissed as disorderly and opportunistic. See, e.g., Michael McBride et al., "Waiting for a Perfect Protest?," *New York Times*, September 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/01/opinion/civil-rights-protest-resistance.html>.

4. See Talia Mae Bettcher, "Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Re-thinking Trans Oppression and Resistance," *Signs* 39 (2014): 383–406; and Rachel McKinnon, "Stereotype Threat and Attributional Ambiguity for Trans Women," *Hypatia* 29 (2014): 857–72.

femmes,⁵ and those “passing as privileged.”⁶ Although a fair amount of attention has been paid to particular cases of double binds found in oppressive contexts, little sustained attention has been given to the nature of these double binds themselves. Such attention is warranted given the central role double binds appear to play in oppression.

In this article, I give an account of the structure of “oppressive double binds,” the double binds that exist in virtue of oppression. I explain how these double binds both are a product of and serve to reinforce oppressive structures. In Section II, following Marilyn Frye’s influential discussion, I ask what it is about the double binds found in oppressive contexts that makes them different from other dilemmas or ordinary restrictions on our options found in nonoppressive contexts. In Section III, I consider and reject a number of proposals about the nature of double binds. I argue that double binds are not simply choice situations where there are no good options, nor are they simply choice situations where one is forced to choose between a morally best and a prudentially best option. In Section IV, I identify what I take to be the central feature of double binds: because of the way an agent’s own prudential good is bound up with their ability to resist oppression, double binds are choice situations where no matter what an agent does, they become a mechanism in their own oppression. In Section V, I refine the picture to address cases where there are multiple competing oppressive norms and cases where there are intersecting oppressive norms. In Section VI, I consider the way in which double binds are bad for the agents trapped in them. I reject two accounts that locate the badness of double binds in the way they compromise an agent’s autonomy. Instead, in Section VII, I argue that double binds limit an individual’s agency by presenting them with an “imperfect choice”: whatever an agent does necessarily undermines their own objective interests. I conclude, in Section VIII, by reflecting on the consequences of my discussion for thinking about how we judge ourselves and others in the context of imperfect choices.

There are three overarching goals in this article. The first is to vindicate Frye’s central insight, that double binds are a powerful and pervasive mechanism of oppression, and that they are importantly distinct from other kinds of dilemmas or limitations on our options found in nonoppressive contexts. The second is to develop and refine the concept of a double bind so that it can be useful in theorizing about oppression. The third is to better understand what I call “imperfect choices”—choices

5. Alice MacLachlan and Susanne Sreedhar, “Complicating Out: The Case of Queer Femmes,” in *Passing/Out: Sexual Identity Veiled and Revealed*, ed. Kelby Harrison and Dennis Cooley (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 43–74.

6. Daniel Silvermint, “Passing as Privileged,” *Ergo* 5 (2018): 1–43.

where, no matter what an agent does, they undermine the very interest at stake in their choice. I argue that “imperfect choices” constrain our agency while leaving various dimensions of our autonomy fully intact.

II

What, exactly, is a double bind? The term was originally developed by psychologists in the 1950s to describe the sort of dysfunctional patterns of communication within families that were hypothesized to cause schizophrenia.⁷ It was theorized that schizophrenic symptoms were an expression of social interactions where an individual was routinely faced with competing injunctions, with no way to respond to these injunctions. So, for example, a mother communicates to her son both that he needs to move out and become independent and that he could never survive living on his own. The son cannot adequately respond to both injunctions, nor can he ignore them. In more colloquial contexts, the term often gets used to describe dilemmas or difficult choice situations. So, for example, we might imagine someone describing a government health care policy that puts health care professionals in a double bind. On the one hand, it says that everyone must be treated within an hour of arriving at the hospital, and on the other hand, it says that the most urgent cases need to be prioritized. Sometimes, it is not possible to carry about both instructions at the same time.

These are not the sorts of double binds I am concerned with. Instead, I am interested in the sorts of double binds found in oppressive contexts. I will refer to these “oppressive double binds” simply as “double binds” throughout the article, but we might think of them as a subset of a larger class of double binds.⁸ It seems to me implicit in much of the current discussion of double binds, both in philosophy and in popular discourse, that the double binds found in oppressive contexts are different from the sorts described above. Specifically, they are choice situations

7. G. Bateson et al., “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia,” *Behavioral Science* 1 (1956): 251–64.

8. See, e.g., P. Benson, “Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization,” *Social Theory and Practice* 17 (1991): 385–408; A. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); S. Killmister, *Taking the Measure of Autonomy: A Four-Dimensional Theory of Self-Governance* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Marina Oshana, “How Much Should We Value Autonomy?,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 20 (2003): 99–126; Marina Oshana, “Autonomy and the Question of Authenticity,” *Social Theory and Practice* 33 (2007): 411–29; N. Stoljar, “Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition,” in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94–111.

that are both products of and mechanisms of oppressive structures.⁹ This, at any rate, is one of the central insights of Frye's groundbreaking discussion. Frye insists that although they might seem superficially the same, the restrictions on one's options in a double bind are unlike the ordinary restrictions on our options that we might experience in nonoppressive contexts. Here is how Frye describes double binds:

One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind—situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation. For example, it is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry, or dangerous. This means, at the least, that we may be found “difficult” or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one one's livelihood; at worst, being seen as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating and murder.¹⁰

As Frye describes them, double binds are situations where one's options are limited and all the options involve punishment or censure. However, she insists that double binds and other characteristic features of oppression cannot be understood in isolation from oppressive structures more generally, or else they begin to look no different from the sorts of limitation or unwelcome barriers that everyone faces:

It seems to be the human condition that in one degree or another we all suffer frustration and limitation, all encounter unwelcome barriers, and all are damned and hurt in various ways. . . . If one is looking for an excuse to dilute the word “oppression” one can use the fact of social structure as an excuse to say that everyone is oppressed. . . . From what I have already said here, it is clear that if one wants to determine whether a particular suffering, harm, or limitation is part of

9. I want to remain as neutral as possible here about what oppression is. Frye's analysis involves there being an institutional harm done to some social group, where this harm benefits another social group. Iris Marion Young argues that oppression should not be analyzed as a single unified phenomenon and that we cannot reduce all cases of oppression to some single kind of oppression. I do not here mean to characterize oppression in terms of double binds; there can be oppressive circumstances without double binds (e.g., ones that involve outright coercion). Double binds simply offer us insight into one of the mechanisms of oppression more generally.

10. Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 1–16.

someone's being oppressed, one has to look at it in context in order to tell whether it is an element in an oppressive structure: one has to see if it is part of an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people.¹¹

Frye understands oppression as a network of social barriers and forces that serve to immobilize and reduce members of other groups on the basis of identity. Moreover, she argues, this network is constructed by, and in service of, the interests of some group or groups. So, for Frye, a cis man who is not a member of an oppressed group might feel frustrated that certain career paths are female-coded and difficult for him to enter: he might experience this as a barrier and restriction on his movement. But, for Frye, this barrier is itself created and maintained by men, for the benefit of men. To determine whether someone is oppressed or not, on Frye's view, it is not enough to know that there is some barrier or restriction on movement, or that some encounter is painful or frustrating. Instead, we need to understand who constructs and maintains the barrier or restriction, and whether that barrier exists in a network that serves to immobilize or reduce some group, for the benefit of some other group.

Her account of oppression is powerfully illustrated with the metaphor of a bird cage:

Cages. Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire at any time it wanted to go somewhere. . . . There is no physical property of any one wire, nothing that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it except in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment. . . . It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon.¹²

What Frye's metaphor effectively brings out is how mechanisms like double binds can present the illusion of freedom. This is because these mechanisms of oppression really do leave an agent free in one respect,

11. *Ibid.*, 2.

12. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

even as they are unfree in another. No one bar in a cage is enough to limit a bird's movement in any significant way. It is only the network of bars, taken together, that limits the bird's movement in every direction. So also, I will argue, it is not the character of any one option in a double bind that reveals how an agent in a double bind lacks freedom or the ability to determine the course of their own life; we face restrictions on our options all the time, and many of our choices have consequences far worse than the ones an individual in a double bind might face. Instead, it is only once we appreciate how the double binds fit into broader oppressive structures that we see how these choice situations serve to mold, immobilize, and reduce members of oppressed groups.

In this article, I seek to give an account of double binds that vindicates Frye's central insight that double binds are mechanisms that both are a product of and serve to reinforce oppressive structures. I show how the choice situation they present is different in kind from other kinds of dilemmas or restrictions on our options. Before developing my positive account in Section IV, I consider in the next section why other proposed accounts of double binds are unsuccessful.

III

What, if anything, makes these double binds distinct from other kinds of limitations or restrictions on our options that we find in nonoppressive contexts? As Frye describes it, part of what characterizes double binds is that the agents trapped in them have a choice, but that their choice has a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" character: whatever an agent does, they seem doomed to bring about a negative outcome for themselves. We saw in the mentoring case that whatever the faculty member does contributes to some degree to a system in which members of underrepresented groups are less likely to succeed in philosophy. And, in the case of the Black graduate student, whatever the student chooses to do, his research will not straightforwardly expand the canon. As Frye puts it, the agent in a double bind "can only choose to risk one's preferred form and rate of annihilation."¹³

It is not immediately obvious how double binds leave an agent damned no matter what they do. It is a mistake, for instance, to think that the choice available to an agent in a double bind is meaningless or futile. Take the above-mentioned case of the faculty member who chooses to informally mentor graduate students from underrepresented groups. It is true that this decision, even as it aims to help diversify the discipline, carries with it a negative consequence: the faculty member gives up time and emotional energy that could be devoted to her research and, moreover, perpetuates a system where the

13. *Ibid.*, 3.

burden of diversifying the discipline falls disproportionately on underrepresented groups. But her options are not equivalent. Choosing to do this sort of mentorship might well provide an enormous source of support and reassurance for these graduate students; it might play an important role in some of them deciding to stay in the field at all. Despite the costs, we might think that the balance of moral reasons lies in favor of the faculty member undertaking this mentorship. It would be appropriate for her to feel pride in her decision, and for others to praise or esteem her. So, although double binds have a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” character, it is wrong to think that what makes the agent damned either way is that her choices are both bad in the very same way and that, as a result, her choice is meaningless.

Perhaps, instead, each option in a double bind “damns” the agent in different respects. After all, double binds often seem to involve a choice between cooperating with and resisting some oppressive norm. Consider a common type of double bind, a case of passing as privileged: a trans woman who chooses to pass as cis avoids immediate harm. One natural way to think about this choice is as between cooperating with and resisting the norm that trans women are not “real” women.¹⁴ By cooperating, the trans woman is rewarded in the short term: she is able to avoid punishment or correction. In general, she is granted some degree of power within the oppressive system in the form of some kind of prudential benefit. The trans woman who chooses not to pass as cis performs an act of resistance against the narrative that a trans woman is not a woman: by declaring her identity as a woman, she openly rejects the prevailing attitude that gender is determined by genitalia or other biological features.

On this way of describing the agent’s options, it might seem as though the choice in a double bind is between a prudentially best option (cooperating in some oppressive norm in exchange for some measure of power or security within the system) and a morally best option (resisting an oppressive norm and incurring some punishment or sanction as a result). And, we might think, what an agent ought to do in a double bind is a matter of weighing their prudential reasons against their moral ones. In some cases, they ought to stand in defiance of an oppressive norm even at some cost to their own well-being. In other cases, they will be justified or excused from such resistance because the prudential costs are too high. But, in general, on this way of describing the choice situation, the agent’s choice is between two competing values—what best promotes their own prudential interests on the one hand, and what best promotes their ability to resist oppression on the other hand. Although I do think double binds generally involve a choice between cooperating in and resisting some oppressive norm, I do not think what gives them their “damned if

14. This picture will be complicated somewhat in Sec. V.

you do, damned if you don't character" is that they force an agent into a choice between a morally best and a prudentially best option. After all, we are often faced with choices between competing values, and many of these involve choices between what is prudentially best and what is morally best. The CEO who can engage in business practices that help destroy the environment in order to get a substantial bonus might face such a choice, but they are not thereby in anything like a double bind.

There is a deeper reason, however, that the double binds found in oppressive contexts should not be characterized simply in terms of a choice between a morally best and a prudentially best option. When an individual is a member of an oppressed group, their prudential good is in many ways inextricably bound up with what is morally best for them to do with a view to resisting oppression. Oppressive structures tend to incentivize complicity with oppressive norms, but these oppressive structures and norms are also what control an oppressed person's access to various prudential goods. As I'll argue in what follows, the best prudential option comes with significant prudential costs, and the morally best option comes with significant moral costs.

The relationship between an agent's prudential good and the good of resisting oppression is helpfully brought out in Silvermint's discussion of passing as privileged. Silvermint is interested in the question whether a victim of oppression should pass as a member of a more privileged group if they can. He argues that passing is at best "a structurally limited strategy, one that relies on the net marginal advantage of protecting or promoting some constituent of one's well-being by endangering or undermining a constituent of their well-being."¹⁵ On Silvermint's view, whether an agent ought to pass depends on whether the well-being trade-offs they make end up being net advantageous; passing as privileged involves a self-regarding complicity because, unlike genuine resistance, the agent is not trying to change or escape the oppressive system that constrains their well-being. Instead, passing victims "keep those constraints in place, and instead focus on exploiting the manner in which they're distributed so as to avoid being constrained by them."¹⁶

What Silvermint's discussion reveals is that an oppressed person's prudential good is threatened so long as the oppressive system remains intact. As we saw with the case of the trans woman in a transphobic society, the agent faces significant prudential risks if they attempt to resist an oppressive system. However, as Silvermint argues, the agent also faces significant prudential costs by cooperating with such a system; they may benefit in some respects, or in the short term, but only by reinforcing the very oppressive system that controls their access to these goods in the long run.

15. Silvermint, "Passing as Privileged," 5.

16. *Ibid.*, 39.

In fact, I want to suggest that there is a further way in which, in oppressive contexts, an agent's prudential good is bound up with the moral good of resisting oppression. The more power or security an oppressed person has within an oppressive system, the more they are able to effectively resist that system. Indeed, their own success or flourishing within the system is itself a kind of resistance or challenge to an oppressive structure. If an agent resists the oppressive norm at operation in the double bind, they are likely to face harm and punishment. And their resistance to an oppressive structure becomes less likely to succeed the more harm they face: the agent cannot effectively resist oppression if they cannot secure their own life or safety, or more generally their ability to fully participate within the system. The junior faculty member who takes up a significant amount of invisible and uncredited labor does so at the cost of her professional success. And, without professional success, she is less likely to be in a position to effectively remedy the underrepresentation of certain groups within the field. Indeed, her failure is likely to reinforce the perception that women are less able philosophers. The feminist academic who resists the status quo cannot find an effective platform to advance feminist aims; indeed, she reinforces the perception of feminist philosophy as marginal. And the trans woman who resists the transphobic culture by openly declaring her womanhood lives in the constant threat of being silenced or erased. This silencing might happen through ridicule: she may be dismissed as make-believing or pretending. Alternatively, this silencing may take the form of bodily harm or murder. Her own erasure makes it impossible for her to effectively resist trans oppression. The upshot in all these cases is that when the agent incurs a prudential cost as a result of resisting an oppressive norm, this undermines to some degree the moral goal they have of resisting oppression.

So far, I have rejected the view that double binds are choice situations where the options are bad in the same way and the view where double binds force an agent to choose between what is prudentially best and what is morally best. Instead, I have argued that, in oppressive contexts, an oppressed person's prudential good is often inextricably bound up with the moral good of their resisting oppression. In the next section, I argue that this relationship between an agent's prudential good and what is best for them to do morally is crucial to understanding the distinctive character of double binds.

IV

As a first pass, I propose that double binds are choice situations that arise when a member of an oppressed group is forced to choose between cooperating with and resisting some oppressive norm, and in which whatever the agent does, they end up reinforcing to some degree the

oppressive structures in place. As we saw, when an agent cooperates with an oppressive norm, they get some prudential benefit in the form of security or power, or avoiding punishment, but they do so at the cost of reinforcing the oppressive structure that ultimately controls their access to power. It might seem that, in some instances, an individual can cooperate with an oppressive structure in such a way as to secure their own prudential good at the expense of other members of the same oppressed group: a woman can, for example, be financially and professionally rewarded for touting misogynist ideology on a conservative news channel. I think even in these cases, however, there is a prudential cost to her decision. So long as the oppressive structure remains in place, the woman's financial or professional success remains precarious: she will be punished if she is ever perceived to be stepping out of line. Moreover, her financial success is likely to come along with other prudential costs: she is not free to speak her own mind, she is alienated or criticized by other women, and so on.

If the agent resists the oppressive norm, they are likely to face harm or punishment, and because their success or survival in the oppressive system is itself a form of resistance, their being punished undermines to some degree their goal of resisting the oppressive system. This is not to say that their resistance is not, on balance, effective in working to dismantle the oppressive system. I do not want to deny that there are good moral reasons for members of oppressed groups to resist oppression, and I do not want to deny that their efforts can make meaningful progress toward dismantling oppression. But I am suggesting that in the case of double binds, there is something necessarily self-undermining about the character of the choice available to an agent: whatever they do, they are forced to act against themselves, becoming a mechanism in their own oppression.

Consider how this compares to someone who is not themselves a member of an oppressed group but acts to resist an oppressive system. Imagine a white male politician deciding whether to take a stand on the mistreatment of asylum seekers at the border. Suppose that if he takes a stand, resisting the oppressive system, he will lose significant support from some part of the electorate he needs to win an upcoming election. The politician's choice is not a double bind in the sense I have described above. This is because he is not himself a victim of the relevant oppressive norm, and as such, his own prudential good is not bound up with the good of freedom from oppression in the same way. To be sure, these goods are not entirely independent of each other; for example, the politician's own political success might help make his resistance to oppression more effective. But the politician's own success or survival is not, on its own, a kind of resistance to oppression. When his political career suffers as a result of his resistance, his failure does not on its own constitute a setback to the goal of dismantling oppression. And, conversely, if he cooperates in

an oppressive system, he is not reinforcing a power structure that ultimately controls his own prudential interests. Instead, his choice is one between two competing values: the moral good of resisting oppression on the one hand, and the prudential good of his political success on the other. It might be that there are prudential costs for him no matter what he does. It might be challenging for him to determine the most effective path for resistance. But, unlike in the case of a double bind, he is not inevitably forced to undermine the very good at stake in his choice, no matter what he does; his choice does not have the same self-undermining character we find in double binds.

One consequence of the view I have defended so far is that some of the work in dismantling oppression might best be done by people who are not themselves members of oppressed groups. The white male politician faces a difficult choice with real costs on either side. However, as I will argue at more length in Sections VI and VII, double binds are unlike other difficult choices agents are forced to make; double binds do not simply force an individual to trade some valuable good against another. Instead, they co-opt an individual's very agency. In this respect, the white male politician faces less severe costs to resisting an oppressive norm than a member of the relevant oppressed group would. For this reason, we might think, he also has a heightened moral obligation to work to dismantle oppressive forces.

To recap: I have argued that the key to understanding double binds is to appreciate how, when an agent is a member of an oppressed group, the two goods at stake in their choice—their prudential good and their resistance to oppression—are bound up together. If they cooperate, they reinforce the very oppressive norm that in the long run controls their access to security and power. If they resist, they are likely to face immediate harm or sanction for stepping out of line, and in general to be put into a position where their long-term ability to resist oppression is undermined. On either option, they are forced to act against themselves, becoming a tool or mechanism in their own oppression.

Some clarifications are in order. First, I have argued that, in a double bind, an agent's prudential good is bound up with the moral good of resistance to oppression. Again, however, I want to be clear that this is not incompatible with there being one option that is morally best and one option that is prudentially best. The faculty member who chooses to mentor students might be doing the morally best thing available to her. Likewise, the trans woman who chooses to pass might be doing what is prudentially best given her circumstances. What I am pointing out here is that, because of the way the agent's own prudential good and their freedom from oppression are bound up together, even when there is a morally best option, this option will involve the agent cooperating in their own oppression and the oppression of people like them, thereby

undermining to some degree their resisting the oppressive structure to which they are subject. This is consistent with thinking that the morally best option is more effective than the alternative at dismantling an oppressive system, or morally preferable for some other reason. And even when there is a prudentially best option, this option will involve the agent reinforcing to some degree the oppressive system that controls their access to power.

Second, I have been treating double binds as choice situations in which there are two options. This is true of the way in which double binds are often described. Of course, however, the reality of these choice situations is more complicated. A junior female faculty member is not likely to refuse any and all mentorship, nor is she likely to completely sacrifice her career for the sake of this kind of service. Instead, she is likely to try to find a compromise: to balance her support for these students against her own professional success. Many double binds will involve not simply two options but a range of options which offer some compromise between cooperation with and resistance to some oppressive norm or norms. As we'll see in the next section, double binds can exist even when there are multiple intersecting oppressive norms, leaving no clear cooperation or resistance option. Even when an agent chooses an option that is a compromise between cooperation and resistance, they are in a situation where the two goods at stake—their prudential interests and their resistance to oppression—are inextricably tied together. To the extent that they cooperate in some oppressive norm, they reinforce the structure that controls their prudential interests. To the extent that they resist some oppressive norm, they invite the kind of sanction or punishment likely to make their resistance less effective. Whatever they do, they end up being a tool in their own oppression and in the oppression of people like them.

Third, it may well be that my account of double binds is not exhaustive; there might be choice situations—even ones in oppressive contexts—that are naturally described as double binds but that do not fit the model I have offered. If so, I have simply described one pervasive and pernicious type of double bind found in oppressive contexts. I'll say more about some potentially difficult cases in the next section.

V

The account I have defended so far needs to be refined somewhat in order to accommodate certain kinds of double binds. Consider a familiar example of a double bind, and one that Frye discusses: a woman is forced to choose between being labeled a prude and being labeled a slut. As Frye explains, if a heterosexual woman is sexually active, she “is open to censure and punishment for being loose, unprincipled or a whore.” If, on

the other hand, she refrains from sexual activity, “she is fairly constantly harassed by men who try to persuade her into it and pressure her to ‘relax’ and ‘let her hair down’; she is threatened with labels like ‘frigid,’ ‘uptight,’ ‘manhater,’ ‘bitch,’ and ‘cocktease.’”¹⁷

On its face, this sort of case does not seem to fit the structure I have described. There is no option that clearly involves cooperation with an oppressive norm, and no option that clearly counts as resistance to that norm: this does not look like a choice between trying to achieve some security or power within an oppressive system and resisting that system. Instead, it looks like a case where there are two competing expectations on what women should be like, and a woman is punished regardless, since she cannot possibly meet both expectations at once. Indeed, this looks more like the understanding of double binds at play in psychiatric contexts, where an individual is faced with competing, mutually unsatisfiable injunctions.

In fact, I think there is a way to understand this case along the lines of the account I have offered if we are careful in specifying the oppressive norm at issue. The oppressive norm governing this bind is not the expectation that women be chaste, or that women always be sexually available. Instead, it is that women not have sexual autonomy: the oppressive norm in operation is that a woman not be in charge of her own sexual decisions. Imagine a teenage girl being pressured into having sex with her boyfriend for the first time. She is reluctant but afraid that if she does not comply her boyfriend will break up with her, and that she might acquire a reputation of being frigid, or a tease, or a lesbian. If she refuses sex with her boyfriend and acquires such a reputation, she may be unable to exercise her sexual autonomy in the future; she will have been written off as sexually undesirable or unavailable. If she complies, however, she reinforces a system where her sexual decisions are not hers to make. Whatever she does, her sexual autonomy is threatened. This double bind does not exist because her boyfriend expects, at the same time, that she be both chaste and sexually available. Instead, these expectations, when they are applied, are ways in which a patriarchal society can exert control over a woman’s sexual choices. Indeed, we can imagine a teenage girl who wants to have sex freely being labeled a “slut,” for similar reasons. Her sexual autonomy is a threat that needs to be controlled.

More generally, it is easier to see the structure of a double bind when we look at particular cases, and when we specify the oppressive norm at issue. Specifying the relevant oppressive norm becomes clearer when we identify the prudential good or goods at issue (whether it be social capital, political power, philosophical influence, or sexual autonomy), and when we identify the kind of punishment or correction that follows from a refusal to

17. Frye, “Oppression,” 3.

comply with the relevant oppressive norm (whether it be denial of participation, bodily harm, refusal of access to certain goods, or the diminishment or trivialization of one's identity).

So far, I have been discussing cases where there is one oppressive norm that governs the choice situation. Not all double binds are so simple. In some cases of double binds, there will be multiple, intersecting oppressive norms. Consider a case described by Rachel McKinnon of a trans woman faced with a choice in her gender presentation:

Stereotypes surrounding gender expression create a number of problems for trans women. One particularly troubling result is that some of the stereotypes of trans women conflict, which sometimes manifests in double binds (Frye 1983). Consider a trans woman with a femme identity and gender expression who wears a dress and heels. According to the pathetic and artificial stereotypes, her choice in clothing doesn't represent her authentic self (because of a commitment to gender essentialism: she's still really a boy), and so she may be viewed negatively for wearing a dress. However, if she adopts a less feminine gender expression, people may attribute her doing so to her "real" gender: male. She thus can't win: no matter what choice of clothes she makes, she's potentially subject to negative evaluations in light of trans stereotypes (and gender essentialism).¹⁸

For a trans woman to be read as a woman at all in certain communities, she will need to present in an overtly feminine-coded way. However, given the stereotypes about trans women as artificial or constructed, an overtly femme presentation risks being dismissed as "trying too hard" or as "inauthentic." If a trans woman does not present in an overly feminine-coded way, her presentation is explained by her not being a "real" woman. In this sort of case, part of what is going on is the intersection of an oppressive norm faced by women in general and an oppressive norm faced by trans women in particular. There is an expectation on all women in certain communities to present in feminine-coded ways, and women are subject to disapproval or criticism if they fail to do so. But in the case of a trans woman, layered on top of this norm is the transphobic view that womanhood is determined solely by biological features, and that trans women are not real women; any attempt that a trans woman makes to present in a feminine-coded way is read as artifice or deception. Even a cis woman faced with a choice between cooperating in and resisting gendered norms about presentation is in a double bind. But the bind a trans woman faces is significantly more complex and more constraining. Because there are multiple intersecting oppressive norms in operation, she does not have a simple

18. McKinnon, "Stereotype Threat," 865.

choice between cooperation and resistance; there is a sense in which anything she does is a kind of resistance insofar as simply being a trans woman is a form of resistance in a community that denies womanhood to trans women. Likewise, there is a sense in which anything she does, to some degree, amounts to a kind of cooperation with an oppressive norm. By presenting in an overtly feminine way, she inevitably reinforces norms about what women ought to look like. But if she does not conform to these gendered expectations, she ends up reinforcing the perception that trans women are not “real” women. Because of the way in which oppressive norms intersect for her, both of her options involve some measure of resistance and some measure of cooperation.¹⁹

What McKinnon’s case brings out is the way that intersecting norms complicate the model I described above for double binds, where one option involves resisting an oppressive norm and another option involves cooperating in that same norm. However, what remains relevantly similar in all these cases is the self-undermining character of the agent’s choice. Because of the way the individual’s prudential good is bound up with their freedom from oppression, whatever they do reinforces to some degree the oppressive structure that constrains their options. The agent is forced to be a tool or mechanism in their own oppression.

VI

So far, I have given an account of how double binds are distinct from other kinds of dilemmas or restrictions on our options found in nonoppressive contexts. I’ve argued that double binds are choice situations where an agent is forced to choose between cooperating with and resisting some oppressive norm, and in which whatever they do, they end up reinforcing to some degree the oppressive structures that constrain their options. In the remaining sections, I want to explore how double binds both do and do not make agents unfree.

One feature of my account is that an agent can be in a double bind even if they are not coerced or manipulated in any clear way. Indeed, many double binds involve a fully informed, rational agent freely choosing among a range of distinct options. However, there still seems to be a sense in which an agent in a double bind lacks an important dimension of freedom. Indeed, this sense in which they lack freedom is built into the very term “double bind.” It is also brought out powerfully in Frye’s birdcage metaphor. I will argue that it is far from obvious in what sense agents in a double bind lack freedom. In fact, I will argue, this is part of what makes double binds so pernicious as a mechanism of oppression:

19. *Ibid.*

they limit an agent's ability to determine the course of their own life while presenting them with the illusion that they are free.

It is natural to think that if the agent in a double bind lacks a dimension of freedom or the ability to determine the course of their own life, it is because they are lacking some dimension of autonomy. In this section, I consider two ways in which the agent might be lacking autonomy in virtue of the double bind they are in. First, the agent might be lacking "relational autonomy" insofar as they live under conditions of oppression; they might, for example, lack autonomy because they are coerced in some broad sense in virtue of the double bind, despite not being under the will or domination of another. Second, the agent in a double bind might lack autonomy because they are forced to act against values or commitments that are central to their identity. I argue that neither of these proposals captures what is distinctively bad about double binds, and in the next section I argue instead that double binds limit an individual's freedom at the level of their very agency.

It is notoriously difficult to specify the conditions under which an agent is autonomous. There are all sorts of conditions under which our options are constrained by external forces, or where we are not fully in control of ourselves or our lives. A successful account of autonomy has to explain how circumstances like coercion, manipulation, and various forms of pathological behavior limit autonomy in a way that other everyday circumstances, like a toothache, do not. A further difficulty, however, is that there seems to be no one concept of autonomy under discussion; Arpaly describes "at least eight distinct things we sometimes call 'autonomy,'" all picking out different ways in which, we might think, an individual's ability to determine the course of their life is constrained in some way.²⁰

One notion of autonomy that might seem helpful in better understanding the kind of freedom that is limited by double binds is that of relational autonomy. The concept of relational autonomy was developed by feminists to capture the ways in which autonomy goes beyond a capacity for self-determination, and instead is compatible with, or even requires, standing in and valuing certain significant social relationships.²¹ For an agent to have autonomy in this sense, certain social conditions need to be in place.

20. Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chap. 4, 118.

21. See, e.g., J. Nedelsky, "Reconceiving Autonomy: Sources, Thoughts and Possibilities," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 1 (1989): 7–36; Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Susan Brison, "Relational Autonomy and Freedom of Expression," in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 280–99.

For example, Marina Oshana understands autonomy as the condition of being self-directed, of having authority over one's choices and actions where these are significant to the direction of one's life. An autonomous agent sets goals for their life from a wide range of options, and these goals are ones that they can hope to achieve through their actions; these goals are formulated according to desires, values, and convictions that they have developed in an uncoerced fashion.²² This sort of autonomy requires certain psychological capacities and dispositions, but it also requires freedom from social or external impediments: "Manipulation and intimidation carried out by others on the individual, unreasonable conformist attitudes and role expectations, sexism, racism, or poverty might all count as external or social impediments of the relevant sort. An autonomous person not only has the capacity for independent decision but also exercises it; the individual must not succumb to the well-intentioned or malevolent attempts of others to control her decisions, nor must she be disposed to impose impediments upon herself."²³ On Oshana's view, an agent is only autonomous if, in addition to certain psychological dispositions and capacities, they also have access to genuine options in deciding how to live, as well as substantive independence, including freedom from the domination of others and freedom from the fear of reprisal for making one's own choices.

Notice, however, that an account like Oshana's is not yet helpful for making sense of how an agent in a double bind lacks autonomy. Here it is important to distinguish between local and global autonomy. We ask about an agent's local autonomy when we ask whether they were autonomous in some particular decision or behavior. We ask about an agent's global autonomy when we ask whether they meet some threshold of autonomy in their life more generally. Oshana's account is, explicitly, about the conditions for global autonomy. That an agent in a double bind lives in a patriarchal society and is always vulnerable to the domination by men explains why, globally, they might be lacking in autonomy; on this way of thinking about autonomy all women lack global autonomy in a patriarchal society. But it doesn't seem to explain why, in virtue of the particular double bind they find themselves in, they are lacking in autonomy in some further way. It does not yet explain the distinctive badness of double binds.

What we need is an explanation for how the double bind itself, in virtue of the kinds of options it offers, limits an individual's autonomy. One possibility is suggested by Cudd's account of "oppression by choice."²⁴

22. Oshana, "How Much Should We Value Autonomy?"

23. *Ibid.*, 102–3.

24. See Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, esp. chap. 5.

On Cudd's view, "oppression by choice" occurs in situations where economic forces incentivize members of oppressed groups to make choices that reinforce long-term economic disparities. So, for example, Cudd argues that various existing gender inequalities make it rational for women to choose occupations with lower wages; doing so creates a vicious cycle that reinforces the unjust division of labor and economic disparities for women. Cudd argues that this co-opting of an agent's choices is a kind of coercion: she insists that we need an account of coercion that captures the unjust ways in which social institutions advantage some groups at the expense of others through the kinds of options available to members of oppressed groups. Her account is meant to capture how an individual can be free to act, and can be fully informed and acting rationally, and still lack autonomy or the ability to determine the course of her own life in some important sense; Cudd wants to show that the voluntariness of the choices that individuals make under oppression does not somehow negate their oppression. We might think that double binds are relevantly similar: as I've argued, an agent in a double bind acts voluntarily, but no matter what they do, they end up reinforcing to some degree their own oppression given the options available.

This is not, I think, the right way to conceptualize the agent's lack of freedom in a double bind. For one, although cases of oppression by choice bear similarity to double binds, there are also important differences between the cases under discussion here and those Cudd is interested in. First, double binds exist in a much wider range of circumstances than those created by economic pressures; there are a lot of ways in which an oppressive structure can incentivize cooperation with oppressive norms that go beyond economic benefits. The prudential goods in question can range from bodily security to career opportunities to social goods like acceptance or recognition. But, second, in the case of double binds, even choosing to resist an oppressive norm reinforces, to some degree, the oppressive structure in question. I've argued that in double binds an agent is not choosing between two competing values. Instead, in double binds there are two kinds of goods at stake—an individual's prudential good and their freedom from oppression—and neither can be secured independently from the other. Cudd's "oppression by choice" does not quite capture the sense in which, no matter what an agent does, they end up reinforcing the oppressive structure that limits their options.

These differences are important because they mean that double binds are far more pervasive and wide-ranging than the cases of oppression by choice Cudd discusses. If double binds are instances of coercion, then members of oppressed groups are in coercive situations every time they are deciding whether to shave their legs or how to wear their hair. I worry about expanding the concept of coercion to cover this wide a range of cases. Given how important a role the concept of coercion plays

in debates around consent and paternalism, it seems to me better to locate an agent's lack of freedom elsewhere rather than to expand the concept of coercion to capture these cases.

A second way we might think that an agent is lacking freedom or autonomy is not directly in virtue of their circumstances, but instead in virtue of the way their circumstances affect something like their internal coherence. Consider, for example, Suzy Killmister's view of double bind and autonomy.²⁵ On Killmister's view, there are four dimensions to autonomy, one of which is self-unification. For Killmister, "self-unification" concerns the extent to which an agent's intentions and actions uphold commitments that stem from their beliefs, values, and goals. Killmister argues that double binds force an agent to uphold some of their values at the expense of others, thereby constraining their autonomy along the dimension of self-unification.²⁶ Killmister does not explicitly offer an account of the structure of double binds. However, she suggests that the "structure of this dilemma is common enough" and that it arises because of the way an oppressive structure "creates disincentives for members of the oppressed group, which give them reasons not to do that which society deems inappropriate for agents like this," explaining that these reasons "function by tapping into the agent's own beliefs, values, and goals, even while they push the agent to act in ways that conflict with other of her beliefs, values and goals."²⁷ What her description suggests is that double binds arise in oppressive circumstances where an agent is given a choice between cooperating with and resisting some oppressive norm, and where there are disincentives for resisting and prudential reasons for cooperating. So far, this is similar to the account I have offered. However, she goes on to explain that the way oppressive structures give an agent reason to cooperate with an oppressive system is by tapping into some of their beliefs and values, while simultaneously forcing the agent to act against other of their beliefs and values. The upshot is that, for Killmister, double binds put an agent in a position where no matter what they do, they end up acting against some of their beliefs or values; this is the way in which double binds threaten an agent's self-unification. For Killmister, a woman who forms the intention to shave her legs fails to uphold her commitment not to act on the basis of patriarchal norms. However, if she forms the intention not to shave her legs, she fails to uphold her commitment to maintain a positive self-image. She is unable to be fully self-unifying, and so her autonomy is reduced as a result.

I think this is the wrong way to think about what makes double binds distinctly bad because, in the first place, I do not think it is the right way

25. Killmister, *Taking the Measure of Autonomy*, 148.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

to characterize double binds. Killmister's view—that double binds force an agent to act against some of her values and commitments—is not sufficient to pick out double binds since many choice situations other than double binds have this feature. Moreover, it does not even seem to be a necessary feature of double binds that an individual act against some of her values or commitments. Consider first how this feature is not sufficient to characterize a double bind. Suppose I am choosing between a job as a philosopher and a job as a community organizer. The former job would allow me to realize my commitment to a life devoted to critical reflection, as well as my commitment to maintaining a healthy work-life balance. The latter job would allow me to realize my commitment to social justice and grassroots political organization. Suppose no job will allow me to uphold all of my commitments. Whichever option I choose will involve me falling short of upholding some central commitment I have. On the sort of view Killmister suggests, this choice situation seems to compromise an agent's self-unification in much the same way as a double bind; in both, an agent is forced to uphold some of their values or commitments at the expense of others. On my view, however, the way in which I am forced to choose between two different values in selecting a job does not capture the way a double bind forces an agent to act against themselves.

To be sure, choosing between two different careers can be difficult in all kinds of ways. Perhaps we do not have enough information to predict which career path will ultimately be more fulfilling. Perhaps, instead, we are not in a position to make a rational choice because our reasons run out; perhaps the values at stake are incommensurable, or the alternatives are incomparable. Or, perhaps, the alternatives are “on a par” in the sense defended by Ruth Chang: the options are comparable, but neither is clearly better than the other, nor are they equally good.²⁸ What an agent rationally ought to do in a difficult choice depends on what the source of the difficulty in their choice situation is. They might need to gather more information, they might need to stop deliberating and flip a coin, or they might need to commit in Chang's sense, throwing their will behind one option, thereby making it the case that they have most reason to choose this option.

Double binds are not merely difficult in the ways described above. I agree with Killmister that double binds often do force us to act on some of our values at the expense of others. But again, I argued in Section III that it is a mistake to think of double binds as forcing us to choose between two kinds of values, namely, broadly moral ones and broadly prudential ones.

28. R. Chang, “Hard Choices,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 3 (2017): 1–21, 21.

What is distinct about double binds compared to choosing between two jobs is that whatever interest is at stake in our choice is undermined regardless of what we do. Both options in a double bind undermine to some degree our prudential interests, and both options undermine to some degree the goal of resistance to oppression. Double binds do not simply force an agent to choose one value at the expense of another. Instead, they force an agent to undermine to some degree the very value promoted by their choice. This is important for seeing why traditional strategies for resolving difficult or hard choices do not obviously help resolve the particular kind of difficulty present in double binds. There is no amount of information, careful deliberation, or act of willing that can change the self-undermining character of double binds.

I have argued that double binds are not merely difficult in the sense of forcing us to act against some of our values or goals. They are also not always difficult in this sense. A woman, on my account, is in a double bind when she faces the choice of either shaving her legs, and so conforming to traditionally feminine standards of beauty, or not shaving her legs and defying those standards. She is in this double bind even if she has so internalized traditional norms of femininity that she experiences no distress or frustration at this choice. Indeed, we might think, oppression is working best when victims of oppression are unaware of the systematic way in which their options are being constrained. The character of her options is still necessarily self-undermining in the same way as the cases above. Whether she is aware of it or not, and whether she cares or not, there are still two kinds of goods at stake for her in her choice—her own prudential interests and resistance to oppression—and they cannot be realized independently of each other. If she cooperates, by shaving her legs, she reinforces, however unwittingly, the oppressive system that dictates certain standards of femininity. If she refuses, she may be insulted, or written off as unfeminine: she is treated as the exception that proves the rule about what women should look like. Including this as a double bind seems to me to be preferable to thinking that an agent can escape a double bind by adapting her preferences in line with oppressive norms in such a way that she no longer experiences a conflict between her core commitments.

Although, like Killmister, I think that double binds force an agent to act against herself in some important way, I do not think we can reduce this self-undermining character to features of an agent's psychology. Double binds force an agent to act against herself in a way that is deeper than being forced to choose one value or commitment over another; specifically, they force them to act against their own objective interests. Moreover, double binds do not even require that an agent act against some central value or commitment. Sometimes oppression is so internalized that an agent can be in a double bind without experiencing any

inner conflict or frustration; they can act in line with their deeply held values or commitments even as they act to undermine their own objective interests.

VII

What, if anything, makes double binds distinctively bad for the agents trapped in them? Frye's metaphor of the birdcage suggests that double binds leave agents free in one sense and trapped in another. I argued in the previous section that we should not think about an agent's lack of freedom in a double bind in terms of either an agent's being coerced or an agent's being forced to act against some central value or commitment they have. Instead, I want to suggest, double binds undermine something like their very agency.

This is inevitably vague. I do not here intend to offer a conception of agency. But, broadly speaking, an individual exercises their agency when their behaviors exhibit the right kind of causal order, or when their behaviors are something that they do, as opposed to something that happens to them. Agency is the capacity to act, and an individual exercises their agency when they act intentionally, or for reasons, or in some other distinctively human way.²⁹ There is a clear sense in which, in a double bind, an individual is exercising their agency. Double binds give an agent a genuine choice, one that they can make in a fully informed and rational way. However, I want to suggest that there is still something defective or imperfect about the character of the choice because of its self-undermining character. They can pursue valuable ends but only in ways that undermine those very same ends. This feature of double binds, I have argued, distinguishes them from other kinds of choice situations where an agent simply faces bad consequences no matter what they do. Double binds are not simply cases where an agent chooses one bad outcome over another. Instead, they are cases in which whatever good an agent aims to realize in their choice is, to some degree, undermined. Furthermore, the goods at stake—their own prudential good and their resistance to oppression—are objective interests they have.

However we describe what an individual is doing when they exercise their agency in a double bind—whether they are acting intentionally, acting on reasons, or throwing their will behind an action—there is, I am

29. See G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957); D. Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" (1963), in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980); R. Audi, "Acting for Reasons," *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 511–46; A. R. Mele and P. K. Moser, "Intentional Action," *Noûs* 28 (1994): 39–68; Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5–20.

suggesting, something odd about a situation where, in acting for the sake of a particular goal, they undermine to some degree that very same goal, no matter what they do. This is not to say they are not somehow the cause of their action. Rather, it is to say that even when they cause their action in the right kind of way, as an exercise of their agency, they are not fully expressing their agency because of the character of their choice.³⁰ The thought here is that the full expression of one's agency might depend on more than simply having the capacity for agency and not being interfered with in exercising it: the full expression of agency might depend in part on the character of the options available to an agent. So, for example, if what makes an action properly agential is something about the way in which an agent throws their will behind the action, there is, we might think, something defective about the character of an agent's will in a case where they are forced to throw their will behind an action that undermines, to some degree, the goal they are hoping to achieve. There has been a great deal of literature on how an individual's material and social circumstances might prevent them from developing their agency. I have suggested that these same circumstances can prevent them from expressing that agency even once it has been developed.

Not only have I not defended any particular conception of agency, but I have not yet said anything about the relationship between autonomy and agency; agency is often treated as synonymous with, or a necessary condition of, autonomy. However, the case of double binds shows that oppressive circumstances are not always autonomy depriving. Indeed, even when oppressive circumstances like coercion limit an agent's autonomy, they may be bad in a still further way, insofar as they limit the full expression of agency. Plausibly, there are many more ways in which agency and autonomy might come apart.

One might worry at this point that the difference between agency and autonomy is merely terminological. After all, as we have seen, more demanding accounts of autonomy may well include something like the full expression of agency as a dimension of autonomy. I think, however, that there are good reasons to avoid building the full expression of agency into an account of autonomy. The more we restrict the conditions on

30. There is a vast literature on the conditions for agency, but almost all of it focuses on identifying the minimal conditions of agency. See, e.g., Anscombe, *Intention*; Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes"; and Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will." Notice that even Velleman and Bratman, who are in search of the conditions on "human action par excellence" or "full-blown agency," are still talking about what makes something an agent does an action or exercise of her agency, as opposed to the full expression of that agency; they are still talking about how an agent ought to be related to her action, and not about how an action is related to the external world. See D. Velleman, "What Happens When Someone Acts?," *Mind* 101 (1992): 461–81; M. E. Bratman, "Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency," *Philosophical Review* 109 (2000): 35–61.

autonomy in order to accommodate various kinds of cases, the more we risk shifting the meaning of autonomy away from its ordinary and philosophical usage. Of course, this is not on its own a decisive objection: sometimes it is philosophically and politically useful to revise concepts with a view to best serving our purposes and aims.³¹ But the concept of autonomy already has important political and philosophical uses in discussions about moral responsibility, consent, and paternalism. It is difficult to see how we can preserve the explanatory power of the concept of autonomy in these debates while also accommodating the idea that agents in double binds necessarily lack autonomy.

Some may be unmoved by this response. If so, what I have done in this article is simply shed light on an undertheorized dimension of autonomy. Ultimately, I am not so much interested in any terminological disagreement as in the substantive difference between the concept of self-determination or self-rule so often captured by accounts of autonomy and the concept of an agent fully expressing their capacity to act. What double binds reveal is that an agent can lack some important dimension of freedom even when they are acting in a fully informed and rational way, when they can select voluntarily from among a range of options, and when they are acting in line with their own deeply held values or commitments.³² Double binds force an agent to act against themselves no matter what they do or how they understand their own action. Although much remains to be worked out, I believe that a more robust conception of agency is ripe for further philosophical exploration.

VIII

To sum up: I have had three overarching goals of this article. The first has been to vindicate Frye's point that once we properly understand the structure of double binds, we see how they differ from ordinary restrictions on an individual's options and how they serve to immobilize and reduce members of certain groups. As Frye insists, understanding this difference between mechanisms of oppression and ordinary restrictions on our options is a crucial part of identifying and challenging oppressive structures. The second goal has been to develop and refine the concept of a double bind so that it can be useful in theorizing about oppression. I have argued that double binds are choice situations in which a member of

31. For a discussion of ameliorative projects, see S. Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?," *Noûs* 34 (2000): 31–55.

32. This is not to say that an agent fares worse with respect to agency in a double bind than they would in a case of a different sort of autonomy-limited choice situation like duress or an irresistible offer. Instead, it is just to say that the way double binds constrain autonomy is different from these other choice situations.

an oppressed group is forced to choose between cooperating with and resisting some oppressive norm, and because of the way their own prudential good is bound up with their ability to resist oppression, they end up to some degree reinforcing their own oppression no matter what they do. The third goal has been to better understand what I call “imperfect choices”—choices where, no matter what an agent does, they undermine the very interest at stake in their choice. I have argued that “imperfect choices” constrain an individual’s agency while leaving various dimensions of their autonomy fully intact.

More generally, I have hoped to show that part of what makes double binds so pernicious, and such an effective mechanism of oppressive structures, is that they co-opt an individual’s agency while providing the illusion of freedom. It is not always obvious when one is in a double bind, and it is even less obvious what the choice structure is in such a bind. One consequence of this illusion of freedom is that it becomes easy to blame or criticize members of oppressed groups for acting in ways that reinforce their own oppression. Indeed, it is also easy for a member of an oppressed group to blame or criticize themselves for acting in ways that make them complicit in their own oppression. Without an understanding of the structure of double binds, it is tempting to locate responsibility at the level of individual agency, rather than at the level of the oppressive structures that make it impossible for an agent not to be complicit in their own oppression.

Consider how common it is for members of oppressed groups to be criticized for cooperating with oppressive norms. Individuals who code-switch are accused of being inauthentic and of renouncing their membership in a particular community. Trans women who present in an overtly feminine way are accused of reinforcing patriarchal norms. People who spend a great deal of time and money to be thin are accused of promoting a fatphobic culture.

Consider also how common it is for individuals to be criticized for failing to cooperate with oppressive norms at the expense of their prudential interests. Junior faculty of color are criticized for doing too much service work, for using their time irresponsibly instead of focusing on their research. Women in corporate settings are chastised for not dressing in ways that make them seem both attractive and nonthreatening to their male coworkers. Black protestors are accused of undermining their cause when they protest in ways that are too “disruptive” or “angry.”

Many of these criticisms only seem warranted when we do not fully appreciate the structure of the choice situation an agent is in. There is no choice in a double bind that does not, to some degree, undermine both the prudential good of the agent and resistance to the oppressive system more generally. There is no survival or success strategy an individual can take that does not, in the long run, compromise their own success or

security. And there is no resistance strategy that does not, in the long run, undermine an individual's own ability to resist oppression. One lesson here is that we need to be careful in the ways we criticize ourselves and others for the imperfect choices we make in contexts where the only choices available to us are imperfect ones.