



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

## **Structural injustice, epistemic opacity, and the responsibilities of the oppressed**

**LSE Research Online URL for this paper:** <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100896/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

### **Article:**

Jugov, Tamara and Ypi, Lea (2019) Structural injustice, epistemic opacity, and the responsibilities of the oppressed. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 50 (1). pp. 7-27.  
ISSN 0022-4545

<https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12268>

---

### **Reuse**

Items deposited in LSE Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the LSE Research Online record for the item.

Tamara Jugov and Lea Ypi

# Structural Injustice, Epistemic Opacity and the Responsibilities of the Oppressed<sup>1</sup>

(Journal of Social Philosophy, forthcoming)

## I. Introduction

Consider statements of the kind: "Citizens of poor countries are often plagued by corruption". "People who do not come from white middle class backgrounds tend to have less access to higher education opportunities". "Women in philosophy are disadvantaged compared to their male colleagues". Common to all these statements is the emphasis on how membership in particular groups renders members of those groups vulnerable to a particular form of disadvantage, one that is recursively implicated in a system of rules that persistently disempowers them. Call this form of disadvantage: structural injustice. And call the agents who are persistently subject to structural injustice: structurally oppressed agents.

The aim of this paper is to examine the responsibilities of oppressed agents in circumstances of structural injustice. It is *not* to explain what structural injustice is and why it matters: we will assume that readers interested in the topic already have some answers to these questions. The point is also *not* to illustrate the baseline with regard to which we can detect structural disempowerment: e.g. with regard to lack of resources, opportunities, harm to interests or access to particular social roles. We begin with the intuition that the wrong of structural injustice consists in disempowering particular groups with reference to *some* baseline and turn to a different issue: that of the obligations of members of such groups to remedy structural injustice. We suggest that responsibilities to remedy structural injustice come in degrees and that they differ depending on agents' degree of epistemic awareness concerning structural injustice.

---

1

We are very grateful to John Christman, Rainer Forst and two anonymous reviewers of the journal for excellent written comments on previous versions of this paper.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section II we offer some definitions and preliminary clarifications. In section III, we introduce a particular kind of injustice relevant to our paper: epistemic injustice and we discuss its relation to what we call epistemic opacity. We suggest that epistemic opacity shapes agents' awareness of their oppression within a structure and should be taken into account when ascribing responsibilities. This can be done, by distinguishing between different degrees of awareness concerning structural injustice and by distributing responsibilities that correspond to these different degrees of awareness. In section IV we begin with the simple case of those who are oppressed by a structure and epistemically aware of their oppression. We continue in section V with the more complex case of agents who are oppressed by a structure but unaware of that oppression, what we call agents in a condition of epistemic opacity. There are different forms and degrees of epistemic opacity. In some cases, agents might know that they suffer some wrong but doubt the fact that what they suffer from can be defined as *injustice*. In others, they might be aware that they suffer from an injustice but remain sceptical that the injustice is *structural*. In section VI we discuss a different case of epistemic opacity: agents who believe that although structural injustice exists, they are exceptional in not being affected by it individually. Section VII discusses objections. Section VIII concludes.

## II. Definitions and clarifications

Structural injustice is a distinctive kind of injustice. Broadly speaking, a social structure can be understood as a system of rules (both formal and informal) responsible for the relative power-positions and the distribution of resources among the different agents complying with such rules.<sup>2</sup> A social structure can be said to be unjust when the rules perpetuated through it persistently disadvantage some social groups vis-à-vis others. Whatever baseline is chosen to help identify structural injustice, if the injustice is to count as *structural* and not merely a result of unfair or unequal distribution, it must express some more persistent or deeper power-differential between social groups. One

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 311 ff.

particularly salient feature of structural injustice lies in the fact that systems of social rules seem to be self-perpetuating. For example, social rules might have been created by agents who no longer exist or they might have emerged as a result of the unintended consequence of certain patterned social interactions. They might continue to be endorsed either through negligence or failure to correct them. Or they might persist because of powerful social narratives upholding them or because they benefit agents who have become impervious to the oppression of others but continue to occupy the key offices and positions that allow such rules to be replicated.

Given the pervasive effects of structural injustice, everyone implicated in the generation, maintenance or reproduction of a system of social rules has responsibilities with regard to its unjust effects. By acting within a particular structure agents cannot avoid contributing both to the distribution of resources as well as to the generation of social rules that the structure replicates. Thus, even if the way such distributions and social rules come about is independent of the will and/or intentions of any particular agent, such agents can nevertheless be attributed political responsibilities for the structural upshots of their actions. The term ‘political’ is important here. Indeed, the model of responsibility at work in this paper is of a ‘political’, as distinctive from a merely moral responsibility. As several authors have argued, political responsibility need not rest on the usual criteria for the assignment of causal *moral* responsibility, such as intentionality, foreseeability and ability to have done otherwise.<sup>3</sup> Although we cannot argue the point further here, in the paper we start with the assumption that those oppressed by structural injustice have political responsibilities with regard to its remedy.<sup>4</sup>

Notice that social rules need not be coercively enforced in order to reproduce structural injustice: the endurance of certain conventions and the way they frame the

---

<sup>3</sup> One very forceful position arguing for the existence of victims’ political responsibilities to remedy structural injustice is presented by Iris Marion Young, see her *Global Justice and Political Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Author A has argued for a power-based political model of responsibility with regard to structural injustice at greater length in her XXX.

<sup>4</sup> In focusing on questions of structural injustice and oppression, we do not deny that individual or group agents might also oppress others in a more direct fashion. As Sally Haslanger has put it: “...oppression is something that both agents and structures “do,” but in different ways. Structures cause injustice through the misallocation of power; agents cause wrongful harm through the abuse of power (sometimes the abuse of misallocated power).” (Haslanger, *Resisting Reality* at p. 320). The way in which individual agents oppress other agents by misusing the power (wrongfully) allocated to them, is doubtlessly an important question, but also not one we tackle in this paper. For an influential account of interpersonal domination, see Philip Pettit, *Republicanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

beliefs of those who endorse them might be enough to incentivise certain actions and constrain others. All this is important because, as we shall see in what follows, the distinctiveness of structural injustice, and the way in which injustice is replicated, renders agents operating within such structure vulnerable to epistemic opacity (some might also call this ideological distortion) when it comes to observing the persistence of injustice. This problem affects both those who benefit (even if unintentionally) from the way in which structures operate and those who are negatively affected by them, complicating the task of reflecting on the complicity and responsibilities of each.

While the problems of ideological distortion and false consciousness are not new, discussions in the recent literature have mainly focused on the responsibilities of perpetrators or beneficiaries of structural injustice rather than on the responsibilities of the oppressed.<sup>5</sup> Even in the few cases where attention has turned to the latter and the responsibilities of the oppressed have been analysed in terms of *resistance* to oppression, the discussion has mainly focused on the reasons for which such resistance might be justified.<sup>6</sup> Following Iris Marion Young and the model of political responsibility mentioned above we will assume that the victims of structural injustice have *some* responsibilities to engage in activities “directed at transforming those structures”.<sup>7</sup> But as Young has emphasised<sup>8</sup> it is important to complement this discussion with more attention to the content of victims’ responsibilities.

There are of course many considerations to take into account when establishing the exact content of those responsibilities. In this paper, we focus on their correspondence to the degree of epistemic awareness victims have of the injustice they suffer. Reflecting on the responsibilities of the oppressed in proportion to their degree of epistemic awareness of structural injustice seems like a much-needed component in any comprehensive account of the responsibilities of the oppressed. However, this demand

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, (Verso: London, 2002); Daniel Butt, “On Benefitting from Injustice”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 37, 1 (2007): 129-152; Robert E. Goodin and Christian Barry, “On Benefitting from the Wrongdoing of Others”, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 31, 4 (2014): 363-376.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ann E. Cudd, *Analysing Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Daniel Silvermint, “Resistance and Well-Being”, *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 21, 4 (2013):405-425; Carol Hay, “The Obligation to Resist Oppression”, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 42, 1 (2011):21-45; Bernard Boxill, “The Responsibility of the Oppressed to Resist Their Own Oppression”, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 41, 1 (2010): 1-12.

<sup>7</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Global Justice and Political Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), at p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Young, 2011: 144 ff.

faces an obvious challenge. The challenge is to trace an account of the responsibilities of the oppressed which is substantive enough to be able to say something about how even those who are in a condition of epistemic opacity can contribute in some way to remedying structural injustice, and nuanced enough to explain what form their contribution must take given the problems of epistemic injustice, complicity and cooptation characteristic of such circumstances.

This approach is of course not without problems. One might worry for example that our focus on the responsibilities of the oppressed runs the risk of 'blaming the victim' where beneficiaries or perpetrators should instead be the main focus of attention. Another worry might be that to place so much emphasis on the responsibilities of the oppressed contributes to increase feelings of shame and self-resentment on the side of already vulnerable agents who might lack the will, resources and opportunities (both material and symbolic) to speak up for themselves.<sup>9</sup> Although it is important to remain aware of these problems (and we will return to them later), it is also important not to victimize the oppressed even further by obscuring their (perhaps limited) forms of agency. The trade-off between taking seriously the agency of victims and showing sensitivity to the circumstances of their oppression might be tackled by introducing a more nuanced account of the responsibilities of the oppressed, as we propose in what follows. By paying attention to agents' degree of epistemic awareness about their own oppression, such an approach sits in between the strong claims of those who insist on the political agency of the oppressed to change their condition and the weaker position of those who emphasise the limitations that structural constraints place on that agency.

Finally, one last clarification is in order. We defined structural injustice in terms of an injustice replicated by a system of rules that persistently disempowers members of particular social groups. Such a definition of structural injustice along the parameter of groups and not individuals is widely accepted in the literature.<sup>10</sup> However our understanding of what counts as a structurally oppressed group is not an ontological one. A social group cannot be defined pre-politically and it is never *only* constituted by the objective, intrinsic or essential traits it possesses such as the colour of the skin of its

---

<sup>9</sup> Marilyn Frye, "History and responsibility", *Hypatia*, 8, 3 (1985): 215–6.

<sup>10</sup> For definitions of structural injustice along group-parameters see Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, p. 312; Iris Marion Young, *Justice and Politics of Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 42 ff; Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression" p. 41, Marilyn Frye, "Oppression" in *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing 1983), p. 11; Ann E. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* p. 118.

members or the nature of their character. Instead, social groups should be understood as generic social constructions or artefacts, which are *also* the intended or unintended product of the application of specific social rules.<sup>11</sup> Such social rules and the classificatory schemes they produce tend to be “normativised”: they do not simply map social realities, but also contain functional and prescriptive aims.<sup>12</sup> Hence social groups cannot be said to *precede* structural injustice in any interesting or meaningful way: they are also constituted by social rules and practices, often structurally unjust ones.

### III. Oppression and structural injustice: the need for epistemic differentiation

How exactly do social rules oppress certain groups? One way to answer this question is by focusing on the negative effects social rules persistently generate for members of such groups, for example by considering the amount of resources comparatively available to them, their access to offices and social positions, their opportunities for further development and so on. This in turn points to the degree of power controlled by members of oppressed groups and to the use of such power to scrutinise, question and amend dominant social rules.<sup>13</sup> In this paper we want to focus on one important subset of this latter category of questions: the way in which social rules affect awareness of injustice and their implications for the responsibilities of the oppressed.

It has often been noticed that structurally unjust systems of rules distort the beliefs, norms and conventions that help shape the cognitive systems of those embedded in such structures. This connects to one way in which the concept of epistemic injustice

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, ch. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp. 99-100. Related social constructivist notions of “social group” can be found in most feminist works focusing on oppression. For example, Nancy Fraser argues that it is not an essentialising group “identity” which requires recognition but the status of individual group members regarding their social standing vis-à-vis others (Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition”, *New Left Review*, vol. 3 (2000), pp. 107-120 on p. 113). Miranda Fricker emphasises that systemic testimonial injustices often operate along identity-prejudicial parameters, which in turn rely on widely held associations between “a given social group and one or more attributes” of it (Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 30). In a similar vein, Iris Marion Young wants to acknowledge the social reality of existing social groups (Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 47), but also stresses that social groups do not share a common nature or essence, but arise from “social relations and processes” (p. 48). She somewhat inconclusively defines a social group as “a collective of persons, differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices or way of life.” (Young, *ibid.* p. 43).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rainer Forst, “Noumenal Power”, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 23, 2 (2015), pp. 111–234.

has been developed recently: hermeneutic injustice, understood as the lack of concepts necessary for the articulation of experiences of the oppressed.<sup>14</sup> Hermeneutic injustice concerns the differential standing of members of oppressed groups in interpretive practices and processes of reason-giving upon which the generation of social meanings necessary to uphold social rules relies. It has to do with the kind of epistemic authority on the basis of which one can establish oneself as an equal member of a community of knowledge and with the shared practices of elaboration and contestation of social meanings.

This is an important aspect of structural injustice. However, there is also another important epistemic dimension to structural injustice that has been noticed less. The danger is not simply the marginalisation of certain voices in their allegedly equal participation in the formation of social meanings. It is also that, to the extent that the views of the oppressed tend to take shape in such a distorted epistemic environment, the oppressed themselves might not be able to fully understand or acknowledge their perspective of marginalisation, internalising the very interpretive practices and conventions that stand in need of correction.<sup>15</sup> The development of adaptive preferences is of course one expression of this problem, one that has already been discussed.<sup>16</sup> But what follows from that when it comes to the political responsibilities of the oppressed?

The epistemic dimension of structural injustice has important implications for the discussion of the responsibilities of the oppressed. On the one hand, if epistemic injustice obtains, it is very hard for those on the receiving end of structural oppression not only to articulate, but sometimes even to acknowledge, the source of their oppression and the responsibility to fight it. On the other hand, precisely *because* epistemic injustice obtains, it is crucial that the experience of correction of defective norms, beliefs and conventions come from the oppressed themselves and not only from those who seek to act on their behalf. If the projection of dominant processes of reason-giving, interpretive schemes and social meanings needs to be corrected, the suffering, reactive emotions, and judgements

---

<sup>14</sup> Here we mainly follow Miranda Fricker's definition of hermeneutic injustice in Fricker *Epistemic Injustice* see p. 7 and pp. 147 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Building on his cognitive interpretation of social power, Rainer Forst has gone as far as suggesting that structural oppression itself should be understood as the process of "closing off of the space of justifications" such that asymmetrical social relations appear as "legitimate, natural, God-given or in any way unalterable" because "the realm of reasons is sealed off". Forst, "Noumenal Power" at p. 125.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Serene Khader, *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).



specific to those who are closely connected to the experience of oppression will provide an important source for doing so. The reason is not only a kind of "moral deference" owed to victims of injustice to ensure that one can bear witness to their pain in a way that respects their feelings.<sup>17</sup> It is also that any account seeking to remedy structural injustice in ignorance of the standpoint of the oppressed would be both paternalistic and more likely to err – an important point that standpoint-theorists have persuasively made.<sup>18</sup>

Yet all this might seem to reveal a tension. Either the oppressed are sufficiently aware of their oppression and able to take up political responsibilities to remedy structural injustice, in which case the argument for epistemic injustice runs the risk of appearing overstated. Or epistemic injustice is present and pervasive but then it paralyses the agency of the oppressed leaving us, as in Brecht's famous phrase, with "only injustice and no outrage".<sup>19</sup> Indeed, acknowledging responsibilities presupposes that their content is feasible ('ought implies can'), and feasibility implies general epistemic awareness by the duty-bearer of the existence of obligations. This seems to render the implications of epistemic injustice particularly difficult to grapple with when it comes to what the oppressed themselves can do in order to end their plight.

It might be unhelpful, however, to consider this problem in terms of either/or. A more constructive approach might be to think about the epistemic aspects of structural injustice and their relation to the responsibilities of the oppressed as a matter of degree rather than full endorsement or full denial of their responsibilities. That is to say, different political responsibilities might correspond to different degrees of epistemic awareness, depending on agents' perception of and ability to reflect on the injustice they suffer within a structure. Taking into account the different forms that such awareness takes might lead to a more nuanced analysis of the responsibilities of the oppressed and, perhaps even mediate between the position of those who emphasize structural

---

<sup>17</sup> Laurence Thomas' excellent essay on "Moral deference" focuses on the issue of empathy in explaining the need to enlarge one's perspective and incorporate the victims' viewpoint while being sensitive to the issue that it is impossible to experience the pain of another person without being that other, see Laurence Thomas, "Moral deference" in: *Theorizing Multiculturalism*, ed. Cynthia Willet (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 359-381.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Alison Wylie's claim that "those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects. They may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience." Alison Wylie, "Why Standpoint Matters," in: *Science and Other Cultures: Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology*, ed. Robert Figueroa and Sandra Harding (London: Routledge, 2003), at p. 339.

<sup>19</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "To those born later" in *Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Reinhold Grimm (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2003), p. 70.

constraints on individual experiences of injustice and those who insist on victims' agency and responsibility to overcome it.

#### IV. Epistemic awareness and the responsibilities of the oppressed

Let us start our discussion of the responsibility of the oppressed by focusing on the political responsibilities of "epistemically aware" agents. By "epistemically aware" agents we mean those oppressed agents who understand and recognize the existence of injustice, its structural nature and how it affects them as members of a disempowered social group. For obvious reasons, most discussions of responsibilities of the oppressed have assumed such epistemically aware – and politically conscious – agents to be the central reference group. An agent is said to be resisting oppression when that agent "engages in an act that issues *from an actual case of oppression, in the right way*". This in turn means that the agent must "intend" to "lessen oppression" and "send a message of revolt" through her actions.<sup>20</sup> Since what is unjust in cases of structural oppression are social rules, it seems plausible to suggest that their disruption and reform requires some collective and political action. Hence it seems obvious that oppressed agents who are epistemically aware have a responsibility to contribute to collective political action against their oppression.

A paradigmatic illustration of how such responsibilities are usually discharged might be the campaigns of resistance to exploitation represented by workers' strikes for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history. We could describe such protests as instances in which *most* of the oppressed are epistemically aware of their condition of oppression – they know both that they suffer from an injustice and that it is structural in nature. Therefore, they make important sacrifices to take up a demanding responsibility to challenge structural injustice. For example, epistemically aware activists (e.g. union leaders) are able to successfully identify those complicit with the production or replication of structural rules and to organise collective action (prior to unionisation these initiatives would have either been absent for fear of sanctions or taken a more individual or more spontaneous form). The duty to create appropriate political structures enabling

---

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Cudd, *Analysing Oppression*, pp. 188-195.

disruptive interventions, to identify and organise the oppressed agents responsible for carrying out such interventions and to reflect on the adequacy of possible alternatives is most clearly discharged by agents who are fully epistemically aware both of the injustice suffered and of the structural nature of that injustice.

To spell out in greater detail *how* epistemically aware oppressed agents might go about discharging their political responsibilities, it might be worth distinguishing between different stages in the process (this will also help us reflect on the responsibilities of oppressed agents under conditions of epistemic opacity later on). As a first step, what might be required is mere sensitivity to the many scattered and apparently unrelated instances of wrongdoing as revealed through either the suffering and actions of the oppressed themselves or through a counter-factual comparison with the position in which they would be if the constraining conditions under which they operate were removed. At this stage one might for example be asking why it is mostly the workers and not the capitalists suffering from low income, bad health and low levels of access to education.

As a second step, one would need to rely on the observations obtained to reflect on the possibility of a pattern linking the individual cases of suffering: do the observed agents display any characteristics in common? Are they situated in a similar position? Are there any properties that they share and that seem to link all of these cases? Can we account for exceptions? This second stage would allow to uncover a pattern behind individual cases of wronging and expose them as part of a wider structure of power relations which conditions the resources, positions and opportunities of those subjected to it – in short it would unveil them as injustices as opposed to misfortunes. At this stage, one would for example be uncovering a pattern of generally unequal distribution of power and resources between workers and capitalists, as observed by an analysis of the distribution of roles they perform and by an analysis of their relation.

But revealing a pattern is also not enough. What seems required further is linking that pattern to a system of social rules that produces or replicates an *injustice* and this leads to a third step: an analysis of the norms, social rules and conventions through which the pattern takes shape. This amounts to revealing the structural character of the injustice at stake. Norms, social rules and conventions support the organisation of experience by providing a predictable background with reference to which our actions become meaningful, connect past experiences with present and future ones and create

regularities through which it is possible to recognise and continue to play one's role in a system. Again, what makes such social rules structurally unjust is not only that they tend to trigger an unequal allocation of roles and positions – for example by conferring advantages to members of some groups over others and exacerbating the vulnerability of the latter within a system. What makes such social rules structurally unjust is the stability they confer on such patterns by themselves expressing and perpetuating deeper and unjustifiable power differentials. For example, at this stage one would need to explain which underlying social rules and practices produce, stabilize and perpetuate the unequal distribution of power and resources between workers and capitalists. Therefore, particular attention must be drawn to those justification narratives stabilizing and legitimizing such norms, social rules and expectations.<sup>21</sup>

The responsibilities to unveil and explicate unjust structural rules seem to form an important part of the political responsibilities of those oppressed agents who are epistemically aware of structural injustice. Only after exposing structural injustice, can one turn to the task of correcting social rules shaping unjust patterns. This can be done by empowering oppressed agents to have a say in such remedial processes, by identifying and trying to establish less deficient rules and by promoting political activism in fighting for them.<sup>22</sup>

As we have described it, the political responsibility to help remedy structural injustice involves a responsibility to act both at the level of uncovering unjust structural rules and at the level of organisation and support for collective activities that seek to disrupt and change them. Epistemic awareness is clearly crucial to both stages, where the responsibility to fight oppression is most demanding and the costs of mobilisation can be very high. Yet, those epistemically aware agents in a position to discharge such responsibilities might only be a scattered few.

However, the content of the political responsibilities of those who are in a condition of epistemic opacity is not immediately obvious. Can those in conditions of epistemic opacity contribute to any of the stages of the process described above? Or are they mere recipients of the benefits conferred to them by epistemically aware members of their group while remaining complicit in the reproduction of a system of rules which

---

<sup>21</sup> See for a discussion of this problem Rainer Forst, *Normativität und Macht* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2015), ch. 3.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the role of political activism and the relation between theory and practice more generally, see Author B XXX.

they fail to subject to critical scrutiny? The answer to these questions depends on how exactly we articulate their condition of epistemic opacity, a problem to which the next section turns.

## V. Total and partial epistemic opacity

Earlier we argued that being affected by structural injustice at an epistemic level entails suffering from a kind of epistemic disadvantage which prevents an agent from developing the appropriate interpretive and evaluative categories enabling her to be epistemically aware of her own oppression. Such an agent will find herself in conditions of what we have called epistemic opacity with regard to her political responsibilities required to overcome structural injustice. Epistemic opacity can in turn take different forms. The first and most problematic one is what we might call total epistemic opacity. Total epistemic opacity involves the inability to acknowledge that the various forms of disempowerment that an agent suffers from are part of a wider *unjust* pattern, and that this pattern might result from a system of rules that is *structurally* unjust. In this case an agent might experience various forms of disadvantage but she will perceive these as the results of moral wrongs. In other words, she might think that those who treat her wrongly are violating moral norms, but not because she is a disempowered member of any particular group. She will lack the epistemic resources needed to perceive the disadvantage as a form of injustice with structural roots. Instead, she might be more inclined to categorise her predicament as a result of unfortunate encounters, own individual failures, random circumstances working against her or the corrupt nature of others. She will in other words deny both that what she suffers is an injustice, as opposed to a misfortune, and that this injustice has structural roots.<sup>23</sup>

To better understand this case, consider the example of an immigrant guestworker who is paid very little, frequently required to perform out-of-hours jobs, or verbally abused by an employer who ridicules his strange cultural habits. Such a worker might lack the epistemic resources needed to understand his predicament as one that stems

---

<sup>23</sup> Some of these issues are well-captured in the vast social psychological literature on correspondence bias and attribution errors concerning structural background conditions, see for a review and influential analysis Daniel Gilbert and Patrick Malone, "The Correspondence Bias", *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 117, issue 1 (1995), pp. 21-38.

from structural injustice. For example, he might not see that his employer thrives in a system of rules that prohibits foreign workers from taking advantage of the country's labour laws, that prevents him from accessing various forms of union protection and that would guarantee him social securities and render him less vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. This worker might simply think that he is in the unfortunate position of his employer being a jerk who wrongs him morally. He might also think that his predicament is one of personal risk-aversion: although if he were to change employment his position might end up being different, he thinks he cannot afford to take the risk. Our immigrant worker is in a position of total epistemic opacity: he does not see that he is the victim of an injustice (let alone of a structural one), but thinks he is the victim of an interpersonal moral wrong. This makes it very difficult to assign him responsibilities for remedying structural injustice.

Secondly, consider a slightly different case of epistemic opacity: what we might call partial epistemic opacity. Imagine the poor citizens of a poor country, whose political institutions fare badly with regard to their ability to respond to the concerns of citizens, for example to reduce social poverty and inequality or to satisfy even basic standards of personal security. When asked to assess the plight of their country, its citizens might very well point to the persistence of injustices, for example they might blame corrupt politicians, the fact that other fellow-citizens only pursue private interests or the fact that people fail to obey the law. Of course, this diagnosis might capture one part of their predicament, but it is also plausible to think of their situation as an instance of a structural injustice, one that inherits its wrongness from a more fundamental level, which has to do with the way in which the system of rules that shapes interactions among people in that state has emerged and is replicated. Although these citizens are right to observe that there is an injustice that afflicts them, they are mistaken or have only a partial reading of what explains the persistence of that injustice. We might say that, for example, they fail to pay sufficient attention to the legacy of the past history of colonialism on their current political institutions or to how the rules that shape the very international standards that they are encouraged (and sometimes constrained) to adopt often tend to advantage the more powerful states at the expense of the weaker. In this case, epistemic opacity accounts for the inability to link one's keenly felt sense that *some* injustice is being done with the more fundamental structural rules responsible for the generation and

replication of that injustice.<sup>24</sup>

Against the backdrop of the analysis of the case of epistemically aware agents, it might look as if it is impossible for oppressed people in conditions of either partial or total epistemic opacity to take political responsibility for structural injustice. Being helpless in detecting the structural roots of their grievances, they might be thought unable to channel reactive feelings of frustration, resentment or anger in *the right way*.<sup>25</sup> And yet, if we consider political responsibilities among the oppressed as a matter of degree, it is still possible for victims of structural injustice in conditions of epistemic opacity to make some, proportionate, contribution.

Consider again our two cases: agents who are unaware either that they suffer from an injustice or that the injustice from which they suffer has a structural component. In the first case (total epistemic opacity) it seems still possible to ask agents to take political responsibility for *voicing* their dissatisfaction, even if we do not expect them to locate the sources of that dissatisfaction in the appropriate site. In doing so they will be able to participate in the creation of a community of epistemic solidarity<sup>26</sup> which will facilitate the first stage of the process necessary to undermine structural injustice that we identified above: observing individual instances of moral wronging and reflecting on shared features of individual experiences of such wrongs so as to contribute to the identification of a potential pattern of injustice. Notice that this does not require agents in conditions of total epistemic opacity to establish the link between their individual experiences and structural injustice themselves. All it requires of them is to be sensitive to the treatment they receive from others, to give their views on the reasons for why the hardship they face occurs and to share the cognitive experiences they accumulate,

---

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of this problem and people's propensity to misattribute the causes of poverty, see Robin Zheng, "A Job for Philosophers: Causality, Responsibility, and Explaining Social Inequality" in *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, vol. 57, issue 2, pp. 323-351. See also some of the sources on which her paper draws, e.g. N. Maseko, D Viljoen, PF Muzindutsi "Determinants of Perceived Causes of Poverty among South Africa's Post-Apartheid Generation" in *Journal of Human Ecology*, vol. 52, issue 3 (2015), pp. 160-7, A.Nayak, J. Pradhan and R. Biswal "Assessing the Perception of Indian Youths towards Poverty" in *Social Science International* vol. 30, issue 2 (2014), pp. 317-330, Ng, I. Y.H. and Koh, G, "Chinese Singaporean attitudes towards poverty and inequality: A comparative analysis". *International Journal of Social Welfare*, vol. 21, issue 2 (2012), pp. 149-159, L. P. Da Costa and J. Dias, "What do Europeans Believe to be the Causes of Poverty? A Multilevel Analysis of Heterogeneity Within and Between Countries" in "Social Indicators Research", vol. 122, issue 1 (2015) pp. 1-20. We are very grateful to one of the reviewers for these suggestions.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Cudd, *Analysing Oppression*.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann, "Epistemic solidarity as a political strategy", *Episteme*, vol. 12, issue 4 (2015), pp. 439-457.

potentially correcting each other's misperceptions, consolidating what seem like plausible views and so on. This can occur in the usual sites of socialisation (be them workplaces, social networking groups, educational institutions or even simply the café or the pub). Voicing dissatisfaction with single episodes of abuse or mistreatment helps provide necessary epistemic material for the wider social process of unveiling structural injustice. For example, individual stories about problematic episodes can help increase sensitivity to individual cases of injustice by rendering more visible (if not explicit) implicit bias, by challenging assumptions that are usually perceived as unthreatening and by beginning the process of sensitizing to the way in which structural rules inform the epistemic resources available to critically reflect on the structure.

In the case of agents in conditions of partial epistemic opacity, political responsibilities seem to go even further. What distinguishes agents under conditions of partial epistemic opacity from epistemically aware agents is the fact that they know that they are subjected to an injustice, but do not grasp its structural nature. For example, such agents might deplore the existence of material inequality between workers and capitalists, but fail to see the underlying structural reasons for this distribution. But notice that since these agents acknowledge the presence of an injustice, they still have responsibilities for associating with others to remedy it. Through the process of associating with others for collective political action, such agents might also acquire additional (epistemic) responsibilities to reflect on the sources of that injustice. Such epistemic responsibilities might consist, for example, in comparing different instances of injustice, seeking to cluster together potentially relevant phenomena, identifying a pattern behind individual cases and thus contributing to rendering explicit certain concealed norms. Agents who experience their struggle as a struggle for justice will usually be easier to organise than those who only see their plight as an individual one. While in the latter case all that can be required is to take up a responsibility to speak out (even if such speaking out does not necessarily take a politically coordinated form), in the former case we might go further and reflect on the responsibilities that such agents might have for finding opportunities for collective political action that lead them to challenge the injustices they experience. In doing so the structural roots of that injustice might start becoming more transparent still: such agents will realise for example that there are structural obstacles to remedying the problems at the level in which they initially thought they needed to be remedied, and the process of acquisition of further epistemic



awareness on the roots of their injustice will proceed in parallel to the process of constructing political initiatives designed to challenge that injustice.<sup>27</sup>

One might object here that all this is places to high a burden on the oppressed. For example, why should a black person who already faces the burden of suffering from racial stereotype not only continue to bear that burden but also face the further responsibility to sensitize members of a racist society to its prejudices?<sup>28</sup> This seems doubly unfair.<sup>29</sup> It is undeniably burdensome to demand a black person to sensitise her oppressor to their employment of racial stereotypes and to encourage victims of oppression to do emotionally taxing extra-work, all the while they continue to be victims of racial prejudice. Here it is important to acknowledge the strength of the objection and qualify our claim by emphasising that we do not suggest that the political responsibilities we have outlined override all other considerations. Obviously, the content of the responsibilities of the oppressed needs to be determined also with a view to other considerations such as overall costs, other constraints on agency, and also such considerations of second-order unfairness. Here we try to spell out the content of the political responsibilities of the oppressed with regard to *one* important component, namely their varying degree of epistemic awareness. And we make a case for considering the component of epistemic awareness when thinking about the political responsibilities of the oppressed. But we have not argued that this requirement should trump all other important considerations.

## VI. The case of “exceptionalism”

---

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, a similar process of acquisition of further epistemic awareness in the course of taking responsibility for remedying what appear as more limited (i.e. non-structural) forms of injustice is not atypical of many historical cases of rebellion. Historically, it has often been the case that a struggle driven by a concern for specific issues and reaction against limited forms of injustice enacts a collective epistemic process in which further causes of grievance are identified and linked by a pattern that was previously invisible to oppressed agents themselves.

<sup>28</sup> Audre Lorde poignantly puts this objection as follows: “Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future. See, Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Freedom CA: Crossing Press, 1984), p. 114, also see Carol Hay’s illuminating discussion of this problem in “The Obligation to Resist Oppression” at p. 32 ff.

<sup>29</sup> We thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

A third version of epistemic opacity is when individual members of oppressed groups accept the presence of structural injustice with regard to their group but mistakenly deny that they *personally* are affected by it: a slightly different form of denial of the structural nature of injustice we discussed above. We suggest to label this phenomenon “exceptionalism”. Take the example of women in academia who agree that in general their social group (women in academia) suffer from some form of structural injustice but affirm that they are immune from it. For example, they might think that they are exempt from such structural injustice because their employers and colleagues have long overcome sexist gender-norms or because they are immune to biased sexist remarks. Or think about the example of hard-working immigrants, who acknowledge the existence of xenophobic norms in their new society but think that they are lucky not to be affected by those because they are blessed with non-xenophobic neighbours, colleagues or employers.

The position of such oppressed agents is also one of epistemic opacity. Precisely because of its structural character with regard to various forms of disempowerment structural oppression must affect *all* members of disadvantaged groups. While agential oppression (i.e. oppression that is directed or individualised) might indeed be absent in such cases, structural oppression is still present and as such determines not only the pattern of distribution of freedoms, options or life-chances, but also the underlying social rules generating and perpetuating such distributions. Thus, a female member of an upper-class group might encounter more deference than discrimination in her everyday life but this does not mean that *qua woman* the rules structuring her ability to make projects are not constrained in the ways we discuss.<sup>30</sup> One might of course still object that some intersectional identities mitigate the effects of oppression to the extent of making it *impossible* for victims of structural injustice to voice their critique in the ways we have described.<sup>31</sup> But if our analysis on the ascription of political responsibility to everyone implicated in structural injustice is correct, how much of the injustice is

---

<sup>30</sup> Demands for an intersectional analysis have been raised by many feminist and critical race theorists. Among others see Hooks, Bell, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press 1981) and Spelman, Elizabeth “Woman: The One and the Many.”, in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*. Ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (London: Routledge 1997), pp. 161-79.

<sup>31</sup> We thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection. For an account that highlights the mitigating effects of an ‘additive’ approach to intersectionality, see Serene Khader, “Intersectionality and the Ethics of Transnational Commercial Surrogacy”, in: *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 6/1 (2013) 68-9.

mitigated in this way is also a matter of degree. Therefore, the objection does not invalidate what we call for: an account of the content of victims' responsibilities which is sensitive to their varying degree of epistemic awareness. Conceding this point still leaves plenty of space for arguing that intersecting group-memberships can open up different strategies and spaces for resistance, protection or articulation of novel identities with regard to experiences of oppression.

To determine what the responsibilities of the oppressed are in cases of exceptionalism, it might make sense to take a closer look into *why* certain agents think they are exempt from structural oppression. In what follows we want to suggest that individually rational reasons for exceptionalism all relate to the primary action-environment of those affected, who fail to link their first-order experiences to disempowerment occurring at the level of higher-order social rules. So why might our female academic think that justice-related problems with regard to women in the academic system exist, but do not apply to her personally? One first reason might be that she acts in such a way as to avoid negative constraints or punishments on the level of her primary action-environment. If she avoids wearing particular clothes and eschews certain kinds of interaction with her male colleagues and superiors in order not to become objectified or sexualised, we could say that she responds to oppressive social rules with *anticipatory deference*.<sup>32</sup> This might amount to a variant of internalised oppression: the oppressive norms are internalised in such a manner as to make the oppression invisible in the first place.<sup>33</sup>

A second reason for exceptionalism could be that some oppressed agents might not admit to any negative repercussions of structural injustice because they are *complicit with* and in some ways *benefit from* the oppressive system of rules. We might label this attitude: *beneficial compliance*. One such example is that of naturalised immigrants who absorb dominant xenophobic norms and start acting by them, for example by becoming hostile to members of their own group of origin and supporting political parties with populist anti-immigrant agendas. As the founder of the right-wing anti-immigrant Swiss

---

<sup>32</sup> See for example Philip Pettit's discussion of a slave's anticipatory deference in Philip Pettit, "Joining the Dots", in *Common Minds. Themes from the Philosophy of Philip Pettit*, ed. by Geoffrey Brennan et al., (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 215-344 on p. 306.

<sup>33</sup> See on this issue Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression", p. 26 ff. For an account of the psychological effects of internalized sexist oppression, see Sandra Bartky, "On psychological Oppression," in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 22-32.

People's Party (which led the minaret ban campaign and supports drastic immigration cuts) has told the press, much of the party's support comes from foreigners, in particular young second-generation foreigners.<sup>34</sup>

Notice that we are not suggesting here that complicit victims of structural injustice manage to escape structural oppression: unjust social rules still apply to them and oppress them, even if they know how to play along. As Susan Moller-Okin has argued, underlying dominant social norms (for example norms concerning the role of marriage in society) still affect the behaviour of those seemingly unconcerned with them (as is the case when unmarried women take life and career decisions with a view to their anticipated role within marriage or with a view to marriage being the primary societal goal ascribed to womanhood).<sup>35</sup> Similarly, social rules regulating the distribution of social power between particular social groups cannot really be avoided. Hence, even though anticipatory deference or beneficial compliance might help oppressed agents to avoid suffering from negative consequences in their first-order action-environment, such agents are still oppressed structurally, in that they are subject to a system of norms which persistently disempowers them qua member of a disadvantaged group. For example, even if the range of options to choose from become formally equalised between man and women, the formation of females' capacity for choice – their higher-order power to choose for themselves – will be constrained by dominant sexist norms, for example concerning marriage, distributions of care- and household-work within marriage etc.

On a conception of justice that is sensitive to structural constraints it is obvious how such attitudes – compatible with avoiding negative effects on one's primary action-environment – amount to a significant loss in the higher-order social power to shape the social rules significant to one's own life. For this more demanding notion of non-domination to be in place, one needs to be able to consider oneself as an equal participant to the interpretive practices on which the generation of social rules and meanings rests. Importantly, oppressed agents who think they are exceptional, are not in an equal position to decide about the social meaning of the norms and conventions that shape and constraint their behaviour. The power of our exceptional female academic to take career-

---

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/what-attracts-immigrants-to-rightwing-politics-/38165754>. Another example is the case of complicit ruling elites in scenarios of colonisation or recent decolonisation: members of such groups internalise the norms and conventions of colonial masters and contribute to reinforcing an oppressive system of rules which then becomes invisible to them at an agential level.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Moller-Okin, "Justice and Gender", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 16,1 (1987): 42-72.

decisions, decide on what to say, how to appear in public and how to flourish in her social environment will likely be curtailed by dominant sexist and oppressive social rules (even if she avoids them, defers to them or benefits from them). Likewise, as long as xenophobic social rules prevail in the society of our hard-working immigrant, her agency will be constrained from these even if she claims not to be negatively affected by them. Examples of such structural effects might include the lack of appropriate role-models from her social group, facing comparatively more difficulties in pursuing career-paths perceived as atypical, special demands of justification both from culturally dominant and latently xenophobic background-assumptions (“are you really sure your kids should enrol in higher education”), and so forth.

Note that it might be fully rational for oppressed agents to avoid linking their deferent or complicit strategies – skirting negative constraints on a primary action-environment – to the question of disempowerment with regard to the higher-order level of social rules. One reason for this might be to avoid feeling victimised.<sup>36</sup> A second reason might be that individual control over collective social rules is notoriously limited and very difficult to obtain. A third reason might be ideologically dominant social narratives and imaginaries that conceptualise responsibility and agency on a purely individual level whilst shielding from view their structural and social preconditions.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, the danger of this position is a more general form of alienation from one's social environment. Indeed, both strategies leading to exceptionalism – anticipatory deference and beneficial compliance – are likely to come at some cost, such as a fractured moral system, an inherently instable and dissonant moral experience and might even go as far as to cause practical irrationality and self-deception.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the moral reactions of third parties to these attitudes are likely to reflect this inherent

---

<sup>36</sup> Indeed, acknowledging how structural oppression also applies to oneself runs the risk of putting one onto the wrong side of the fence, turning one into an official member of the group of the “weak” or “victimised”. This might be linked to a general suspicion that structural explanations counter personal achievements: if our female academic has worked long and hard extra-hours in order to gain the same standing as her male colleagues, it might be a general reflex to deny that her present position has anything to do with structural reasons. Another important factor here might be the existence of powerful social narratives of blaming the victim – think about all the examples of everyday discourse which blames women for behaving in a sexualised way and therefore accuses them of bearing some responsibility for sexual assaults on them.

<sup>37</sup> This has been an important criticism of Sandberg, Sheryl, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, (London: WH Allen 2013), see for example Rottenberg, Catherine, “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism”, *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 28 (2014), pp. 418-437.

<sup>38</sup> Hay, “The Obligation to Resist Oppression” on p. 24 ff.

moral tension. Third parties will most probably *not* view complicit or deferent behaviour as an expression of autonomy in an abnormal social moral context<sup>39</sup>, indeed they are more likely to view it as individually cunning but morally problematic.

Having explained why exceptionalism remains untenable and self-delusive, let us return to our initial question: what are the political responsibilities of such oppressed agents? Isn't it a little idle to simply posit responsibilities to change one's own consciousness and take a more epistemically enlightened standpoint once we come to terms with just how pervasive these agents' condition of epistemic opacity might be? In the previous pages, we tried to show how one particularly salient problem in cases of exceptionalism is the missing link between individuals' adaptive strategies to a structurally oppressive environment and their acknowledgement of its pervasiveness. We have also argued that there might be strong reasons for why individual agents avoid acknowledging this link.

One way in which oppressed agents might put themselves in a better position to connect the individual to the structural position is by deliberating and exchanging their experience and their reasons for why they think they are exceptional. It does not seem too demanding to require those who think they are exceptional to compare the different sources for their exceptionalism. Indeed since, as we suggested earlier, these sources are likely to differ, the comparison to other cases might help agents to unveil higher-order and more pervasive social rules to which both of their behavioural strategies react. Taking up the responsibility to explain and express just *why* one thinks one is exceptional and comparing one's experience with that of others might lead agents to discover common cause in reflecting on counterfactual possibilities about how each tends to operate in their environment. For example, our female academic who so carefully avoids wearing particular clothes or flirting with powerful colleagues will wonder why it is *she* that needs to make the extra effort, while her male colleagues do not need to navigate quite so carefully in the same work environment. Even if such behaviour comes to her quite naturally and does not demand much of an extra effort, a comparative element in reflecting about her future experiences will be introduced and might eventually point towards the missing link between the individual experience and the structural problem. On the other hand, agents who benefit from being successful in the system might

---

<sup>39</sup> See for a useful related discussion that also underlines the social dimension of morality Cheshire Calhoun, "Responsibility and Reproach" *Ethics*, 99, 2 (1989): 389-40, at p. 396 ff.

understand that although they personally avoid the negative consequences of structural oppression on their primary action environment, other members of their group might not. Through a mutual confrontation of their individual experiences, they might also see that although they tend to ascribe their exceptional position to the possibility of identifying margins of agency while playing by the dominant rules, they are not in control of the rules themselves and hence lack real social and political power. Only by exchanging reasons and explanations for their exceptionalism, oppressed agents might come to observe structural reasons for their position and hence build towards a more open public reflection with regard to it. And only then will they also come to understand that empowerment means not to play by the rules (even when one individually benefits) but to be an equal contributor to their making.

Developing strategies of collective agency and change, targeting the underlying system of social rules is not an easy task. Individuals alone seem ill-equipped to transform the way structures operate. However, to understand one's personal position in relation to these is a first and necessary step for doing so. Indeed, only then and only after the emergence of public awareness on the relevant form of structural constraints can agents be in a position to question, criticise, deride or subvert such deficient social rules<sup>40</sup> and only then can one engage with more demanding collective responsibilities for political activism. In this sense, oppressed agents who are in some way exceptional might be important role models for other members of their groups, and their example is especially progressive and encouraging when they have obtained some degree of awareness of the different ways in which one can be implicated in structural injustice. For example, powerful female professors who "made it" are surely in a better position to raise awareness of unjust gender-norms than young scholars on short-term contracts. By enjoying some degree of respect from powerful players within the unjust system given their record of success within it, they might be able to draw strength on their favourable position as individuals to reflect on the (in)justice of the structure as a whole. Likewise, immigrants from particularly marginalised groups are likely to play an important role if they obtain access to positions of power, including political office. Here individual experiences far from serving as a counter-example to the pervasiveness of structural

---

<sup>40</sup> The technique of irony and parody as means of resistance to dominant social norms is discussed by Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (NY: Routledge, 1990) in Chapter 3 and in her *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

injustice, can help to make issues of structural injustice more visible and to mobilise collective forms of fighting against them. In all these cases, once we see the process of acquiring further epistemic awareness for one's position as distributed along different degrees, the responsibility of victims to remedy structural injustice is also easier to discharge.

## VII. Further clarifications and objections

This paper sought to reflect on the political responsibilities of the oppressed in a way that is sensitive to what we called epistemic opacity with regard to one's own oppression. The specific list of responsibilities we discussed is not supposed to be exhaustive; a more comprehensive account requires more work (both normative and empirical) to identify relevant kinds of structural injustice and groups that are affected by it (an issue that falls beyond the scope of this paper). The political responsibilities we discussed are therefore supposed to be exemplary rather than comprehensive. Even so, one might wonder what their exact nature and status is: how do they relate to general and special responsibilities? And how do they relate to duties of justice and to general moral duties?

Let us start with the first question. As we emphasised at the beginning of the paper, we understand the responsibilities of the oppressed to be grounded on the special political responsibility that *everyone* implicated in the reproduction of an unjust structure has to contribute remedying the injustice of that structure. We recognise that there might be alternative ways to ground such responsibilities and that these alternatives are different from the political route which we have followed and which focuses on the structural and not necessarily intended or foreseeable upshots of one's actions.<sup>41</sup> However, once we assume the plausibility of the political route for grounding responsibilities, it is instructive to reflect on the exact degree of epistemic awareness relevant to specifying the content of those responsibilities. Thus, even if the ground for

---

<sup>41</sup> Given our insistence on political responsibilities that fall on everyone implicated in structural injustice, it follows that those in a position of epistemic opacity are in some way culpably ignorant – we are grateful to one of the referees for asking us to make this point explicit. But notice that in the model of political responsibility outlined here culpability is much less relevant as a criterion than in alternative moral models underlining causal factors and epistemic oversight.



the victims' responsibilities is the duty that falls on everyone implicated in a system of structural injustice to do their part remedying it, the content of such responsibilities remains distinct from more general and forward-looking duties to abstain from contributing to structural injustice. It is also distinct from the special duties of beneficiaries or bystanders who are not themselves members of an oppressed social group. However, it is worth emphasising that nothing we have said in this paper denies that those other types of duties exist and are very important and stringent.

This takes us to a second point. Throughout the paper we have been referring to "responsibilities" and not duties precisely to avoid linking political responsibilities to very stringent demands that could be discharged at very high cost to the victims of structural injustice. While duties of justice are often taken to be stringent, enforceable and determinate duties, it is clear that none of the political responsibilities discussed here are enforceable in a literal sense, and it is also clear that their content is relatively indeterminate.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless given their grounding in practices of structural injustice, it seems plausible to argue that the responsibilities here described are motivated by *considerations of justice*. Even though they cannot be thought of as duties of justice in a strict sense, both their genesis and content relate to the existence of special contexts of structural injustice.

It is also important to emphasise that the degree of epistemic opacity in the awareness of injustice is only one consideration to take into account when fully specifying the concrete content of the responsibilities of the oppressed with regard to structural injustice. It is undeniable that this perspective must be complemented by other considerations, such as the likely costs of particular actions, the intersecting group-memberships of a particular person, other conflicting responsibilities agents might face and so on. Although we have argued that the oppressed do possess a significant degree of agency, the content of their responsibilities should be spelled out with a view to what kinds of reasonable costs can be expected of them. This requires sensitivity to the circumstances in which agents act. Taking up the responsibility to resist racism through collective political organization would have had immense costs in the ante-bellum South of the USA whereas discharging such responsibility in contemporary America might still be very costly but to a lesser degree. This clarification might help deflect some of the

---

<sup>42</sup> Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression" on p. 28 ff.

objections concerning the demandingness of the responsibilities of the oppressed that we examined earlier on.

## VIII. Conclusion

In this paper, we assumed that agents who are structurally oppressed have responsibilities to oppose their oppression, but we have argued that these responsibilities need to be differentiated according to the degrees of awareness those agents have with regard to structural injustice. We suggested to distinguish three kinds of “epistemic opacity”: full epistemic opacity, partial epistemic opacity and exceptionalism. In the case of full epistemic opacity, it seems difficult to ascribe political responsibilities above the responsibility to voice one’s dissatisfaction with single instances of apparent injustices. On the other hand, we argued that agents in conditions of partial epistemic opacity and agents who feel exceptional in not being affected by structural injustices may have stronger responsibilities. In the case of agents in conditions of partial epistemic opacity, we suggested responsibilities of reflection on the sources of the accepted injustice, aimed at helping such agents identify a pattern behind individual cases and contributing to rendering concealed rules explicit. In the case of exceptionalism we suggested responsibilities that encourage agents to link up individual experiences to more general background assumptions. Particularly, by communicating and associating with others in a similar position but with different reasons for exceptionalism, we suggested that underlying oppressive rules and their pervasiveness might become more visible. All this might further contribute to the development of collective strategies of empowerment and change, leading to potentially more demanding political responsibilities to transform the current oppressive system.