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Elements of a Self-Deconstructive Ethic

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State University of New York at Albany

Philosophy Undergraduate Honors Thesis

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May 12, 2011

*Section I: Introduction*

By “coming to terms with life” I mean: the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, by my looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it.

-Etty Hillesum, from *An Interrupted Life*.

In the discussion that follows, I explore what I have called, *A Self-Deconstructive Ethic*. As such a title implies, the path that this ethic outlines is one in which its practitioner commits to a “letting go of the self.” For we all form self-conceptions—ideas concerning who we fundamentally are as individuals. Those ideas form the conceptual basis of what we tend to include when we use words like “me,” or “I.” But, just as we might peel back the layers of an onion, a self-deconstructive ethic asks us to peel back the layers of assumptions that we take to be fundamental in constituting our identity. The motivation for such an account of ethics is most certainly derived from Eastern philosophical accounts of the self, or rather, the *non-self*. This is not to say, however, that Western philosophy does not acknowledge the importance of the “non-self” perspective to a degree. Peter Singer rightly observes: from Jeremy Bentham to Immanuel Kant, and from Nagel to Rawls, “Ethics requires us to go beyond “I” and “you” to the universal law, the universalizable judgment, the standpoint of the impartial spectator...or whatever we choose to call it.”<sup>1</sup> So there is a sense in which even Western ethical theory has been involved with some form or another of self-deconstruction, or at the very least, a diminishment in the role of the self in terms of ethical decision making. Rawls’s original position, for instance, is a structural device that is meant to strip away most of our self-defining characteristics so that we

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<sup>1</sup> Singer, p. 15.

may derive fair principles of justice.<sup>2</sup> While, initially, our Western influences may incite suspicion regarding self-deconstructive projects, it is important to acknowledge that the theme of self-deconstruction is not an isolated Eastern tradition; rather, in some form, the theme of deconstructing the self is a tradition in the study and theory of ethics more broadly.

In the argument that follows, I will suggest that our capacities for oppression are fundamentally connected to the attachments we hold to our self-conceptions, and thus our potential of eliminating oppression is found in our capacity to deconstruct our self-conceptions. In the first section, I will expand upon this general argument and its approach, providing some detail regarding the nature of oppression and how a self-deconstructive ethic might help us overcome it. In §3, I will discuss how moral luck plays a role in our pursuit of ending oppression. In §4, I will explore the role of our moral capacity for self-reflection in our pursuit of self-deconstruction, and I will also discuss how we might apply this ethic beyond an interpersonal context of oppression and toward the standards we adopt within our institutions.

## *Section II: Elements of a Self-Deconstructive Ethic*

### **2.1 An Aspiration to End Oppression**

This self-deconstructive ethic is founded on an aspiration: the end to human oppression. Thinking about oppression is the starting point of this account. Just as it would be difficult for an epidemiologist to eradicate a disease without first knowing the relevant nature of the disease, it would be similarly difficult to end oppression without first coming to know oppression; how it relates to us and our relationships, and how we can recognize it. The expansive project of defining and interpreting the entire phenomenon of oppression is unfortunately beyond the scope

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<sup>2</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*.

of this particular account. However, I intend to explore certain distinguishing elements of oppression that will be sufficient for guiding us in the subsequent project of developing a self-deconstructive ethic with the aim of ending oppression.

First and perhaps most generally, oppression is a consequence of human conduct. This point might seem trivially obvious, but it is important because it tells us something quite significant concerning what oppression is not. Oppression is not a matter of natural or accidental harm. One is not oppressed by the risks and harms that pervade our natural environments. The tornado that destroys my house has not oppressed me, but the person who burns my house down because of the color of my skin has. The tiger that attacks my family has not oppressed me, but the person who harasses my family because of our practicing religion has. Certainly tigers and tornadoes can harm human beings, but neither has the potential to oppress human beings. This potential is uniquely human. From this observation, we know that oppression is a particular kind of *human-derived* harm.

We can draw certain distinctions between oppression and, say, general forms of human harm. One defining characteristic, in particular, seems consistently acknowledged across different interpretations of oppression. This is the observation that oppression is a kind of harm that targets persons on the basis of *who* they are perceived to be. As Marilyn Frye puts it, “If an individual is oppressed, it is in virtue of being a member of a group or category of people”.<sup>3</sup> Continuing with this point, Iris Marion Young elaborates on the notion of what constitutes the term “group,” as she says, “To be in a group is to share with others a way of life that defines a person’s identity and by which other people identify him or her.”<sup>4</sup> Oppression then, compared to more general human-induced harms, has a unique connection to our conceptions of self and

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<sup>3</sup> Frye, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> Young, p. 93.

identity. Oppression entails harms that are caused in virtue of *who* we perceive others to be: one is oppressed in virtue of being a woman, a homosexual, a Muslim. Understanding oppression and recognizing it in our own lives will require a critical examination in the kinds of ways that we see and define people, and even how we come to define ourselves in relation to others.

Further, coming to understand oppression will require an understanding of the complexities and ambiguities of the dynamic between the oppressor and the oppressed. A question we might ask is, what role does each play in contributing to the larger reality of oppression? And, as Primo Levi observes in his descriptions of the terrors within Nazi concentration camps, the answer to this question is ambiguous: “The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also *indecipherable*: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but also *inside*,”<sup>5</sup> and he previously remarks that human relationships within the camps, “could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors.”<sup>6</sup> As Levi describes, there is a certain sense in which the nature of oppression involves an ambiguity of how we might identify victims and oppressors. It seems that, at least in part, we have the great capacity, as victims, to contribute to the realities of our own oppression. And, as oppressors, we might contribute to our own oppression more than we realize. In the words of Frederick Douglass, “The slaveholder is the author of his own subjection. There is more truth in saying, that slavery is a greater evil to the master than to the slave, than many, who utter it, suppose.”<sup>7</sup>

It would seem that oppression exists and is perpetuated within the hearts and minds of both the oppressor and the oppressed victim. We must be careful, as victims of oppression, to resist condemning ourselves (e.g. in coming to believe that we are without worth). Etty Hillesum, a Nazi prisoner who recorded her experiences of living within a Jewish ghetto,

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<sup>5</sup> Italics added.

<sup>6</sup> Levi, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Douglass, p. 80.

describes the victim's capacity to oppress himself, as she explains, "Humiliation always involves two. The one who does the humiliating, and the one who allows himself to be humiliated. If the second is missing, that is, if the passive party is immune to humiliation, then the humiliation vanishes into thin air."<sup>8</sup> And Hillesum goes on to say, "By our feelings of being persecuted, humiliated and oppressed...our greatest injury is one we inflict upon ourselves." This statement is not intended to displace the degree of moral blame we ascribe to the oppressor, and it is not an attempt to place unwarranted blame on oppressed people for causing the conditions of their oppression. Rather, in realizing that we—the victims of oppression—contribute psychologically to our own oppression for all the reasons Hillesum mentions (e.g. in our ability to indulge in our humiliation, and to give into the belief that we are lesser) we are *empowered* with the knowledge that at least a part of our subjugation can be diminished if we alter the harmful ways in which we perceive *ourselves*. As bell hooks says, "It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppressor within that we must resist—the potential victim within that we must rescue—otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, for liberation."<sup>9</sup>

Does this mean that oppression is primarily psychological? Are we capable of being oppressed if, as victims, we release ourselves from self-hatred and our feelings of persecution? I am not committed to a fully psychological interpretation of oppression. For, at least intuitively, it seems that one can still be oppressed whether or not they choose to acknowledge it. However, there is power to resist oppression in our own peace of mind and in the compassion we are willing to extend to ourselves. So while I hesitate to say that oppression can be fully reduced to our psychological dispositions, I think that our own psychology plays a much larger role in the perpetuation of oppression than what we might assume.

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<sup>8</sup> Hillesum, p. 144-145.

<sup>9</sup> hooks, p. 465.

An element of oppression that I have left intentionally vague is the distinction between interpersonal acts of oppression and systemically derived forms of oppression. It is true that oppression, as a form of harm, exists on both of these levels. In instances of interpersonal oppression, there is a sense that the harming of others is intended on some conscious level, and usually (but not always) the involved parties are in closer proximity with one another. Whereas, it is conceivable that one could be completely unconscious of the kinds of systemic forms of oppression that one contributes to. For instance, every time I buy coffee at the grocery store, I might unknowingly contribute to the oppression and exploitation of farmers living in different countries around the world. However, a primary focus of this self-deconstructive ethic, as will be discussed, is the reduction or elimination of a person's internal potential for oppression. Therefore the discussion that follows will apply mostly to matters of interpersonal acts of oppression. However, another focus of this paper will be to apply the elements of a self-deconstructive ethic to the standards we adopt within our institutions and the larger organizations of society, and here the acknowledgement of oppression as a consequence of systemic structures will become more apparent.

In this section I have attempted to provide certain key elements of oppression that may help us in uncovering an ethic that will guide us in the project of ending oppression. Namely, I have concluded that oppression is a human-derived form of harm in which oppressed people are targeted on the basis of who they are perceived to be; and further I have suggested that the dynamic between oppressor and oppressed victim is such that both play a role in contributing to the conditions of their own oppression.



## 2.2 Death and the Motivation for ‘Self’ Preservation

The fear of death is, undoubtedly, a powerful source of motivation. But what is that we fear? Presumably, we see death as an absence of something, so it is then an absence that we fear. And that thing, which we are fearful of losing upon death, is, of course, the *self*. Therefore, the fear of death is a fear of the destruction of the self. To say that our fear of the destruction of our selves is a powerful source of motivation in our lives is to say that nearly everyone lives with the perpetual desire to preserve the self. The implications of *this* strong desire form the foundation of a self-deconstructive ethic.

We live with the strong desire to preserve the self, and we fear its destruction. As you might assume, and as the title of §2 suggests, the ethic I support is one where we seek to deconstruct the self—against our strong desire of self-preservation. So why then, if we have such strong desires to preserve the self, should we adopt an ethic that asks us to do exactly the opposite of what this internal desire would have us do? We can start to uncover the answer to this question once we consider the horrible things even the most ordinary person is capable of doing when it is a matter of self-preservation.

Death, you might say, is the ultimate test of our moral limitations. When we are faced with the perceived destruction of our self, we become much more likely to justify actions that would be far more difficult to justify when the threat facing the self is not imminent. We might justify the forceful taking of each other’s possessions, the taking of each other’s freedoms (in the form of imprisonment), violence toward one another, and much more. Now, all of this will probably not come as a surprise to most. In fact, I suspect that most people will find these actions quite reasonable in circumstances of imminent threat to the self. They might say that killing is justifiable when it is necessary to preserve your life; or if someone threatens to kill you, it might seem justifiable to do whatever they tell you to do: steal, murder or torture. If making these kinds

of self-preserving choices is not justifiable (in a moral sense), one might reasonably contend that they are understandable given the circumstances. My point isn't to argue whether or not these actions are, or can ever be, justifiable or even understandable. My point is only to show that the desire to preserve the self is a powerful motivator—so powerful that it has the capacity to transform many actions we would normally take to be unjustifiable and make them at least *seem* permissible.

Taken by itself, this is a morally worrisome capability: a *perceived* threat to the self can lend an internal justification toward horrible actions—justification for retaliation, inflicting violence on another, or letting someone perish instead of offering help. For instance, if a child is struggling to stay afloat in a pond, and I was (falsely) led to believe that there are man-eating alligators in that pond, I may refuse to offer the child life-saving assistance on the basis of preserving my own life. Our motivations for self-preservation become especially morally worrisome when we consider what other kinds of things actually end up counting as perceived threats to the self. For every person has a conception of the self, or what we also might call *an identity*. This conception is usually a psychological compilation of various qualities, including physical characteristics and personality traits. And some qualities associated with our person are more intimately connected with our conception of our selves than others—for example, I do happen to have blonde hair, but were one to dye my hair brown, I would not consider this too significant a change in what it means to be *me* (although even a loss of this insignificance might cause some discomfort). If someone were to strip me of my passion for philosophy, on the other hand, I would perceive this as a serious threat to what it means to be me. We should not assume that our motivations for self-preservation only encompass our desire to preserve our physical bodies. It encompasses whatever we *perceive* to be a part of our self, our identity. And, if this is

correct then the circumstances in which we might find ourselves committing harm on the basis of self-preservation could end up being dangerously pervasive in our everyday circumstances.

We would imagine, though, that not everyone would be willing to commit murder as long as they are allowed to continue practicing philosophy. And, this might be true even for a person who really loves philosophy (or any other interest for that matter). We can also imagine, however, a person who would not put up much of a fight if someone tried to kill them (a depressed person, for instance)<sup>10</sup>. The point here is to notice that among people, we will all value different things, to varying degrees, when it comes to preserving our selves. Our attachments to our selves, or to our conceptions of identity will vary greatly among persons. When a trait is perceived to be so integral to our self-conceptions that the threat of losing such a trait triggers our self-preserving desires, this trait is *rigidly* fixed in our identities. Some people will maintain greater or lesser amounts of rigidly fixed traits within their own self-conception. If one has a greater amount of these rigid traits they have, what I call, an excessively *rigid* identity. Rigid identity can be contrasted with *fluid* identity. Both can be defined as follows:

- 1. Rigid Identity:** A person exhibiting rigid identity is more likely to perceive any particular trait, or group of traits, as fundamental to his own self-conception.
- 2. Fluid Identity:** A person exhibiting fluid identity is less likely to perceive any particular trait, or group of traits, as fundamental to their own self-conception.

Consider this example: Ted has many qualities associated with his person—he is tall, he has brown eyes, he is Caucasian and he possesses the trait of being the family breadwinner. His perception of his self, however, is rigidly tied to two traits, in particular. For Ted takes great pride in his masculinity and his ability to provide for his family. Ted, in a very real sense, sees

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<sup>10</sup> A self-deconstructive ethics does not advocate suicide. A suicidal person—through either terrible life circumstances, harassment or bullying, to name a few examples—might already perceive his identity to be destroyed, worthless or beyond repair; and since he already perceives his identity destroyed, he might not be deterred from the threat of physical death, it might even seem appealing. A self-deconstructive ethics encourages one to realize that identities were never something that defined us in the first place.

himself rigidly and explicitly as the man who supports his family. If Ted is threatened with a loss of these traits (say his wife shows interest in getting a job), then, as far as he is concerned, his self is fundamentally threatened. And given the actions that seem justifiable in light of a perceived threat to the self, Ted might act in horrible ways in order to preserve his masculine status—abusing his wife to keep her home, or just about any other mean to the end of preserving his own self-conceived identity.

While at first we may find it more understandable when people do horrible things when they act in response to an immediate threat facing their selves; upon further reflection, moral worries arise when we consider the vast number of ways in which one might conceive of himself, and thus how one might perceive an immediate threat toward himself. It seems at least possible that we could form such rigid conceptions of our own identities, that even the most mundane events in the world could “trigger” our self-preserving desires. Consider this next example. Two men are holding hands and walking down a busy sidewalk. Another man watches from afar, and gets angry from just looking at the two men holding hands. Why would the onlooker become angry? This scenario, too, can be explained in terms of rigidity of identity and our strong desire to preserve the self. The onlooker, who maintains a rigid conception of male heteronormativity as a defining characteristic of his own identity, may see the two male partners as an external contradiction to his own rigid conception of what is allowed for when it comes to male behavior. In this situation, the onlooker has two options: either he can *deconstruct* his existing presumptions of what it means to be a male and allow for a greater (more fluid) realm of possibility, or he can reaffirm his existing conceptions, but this requires that he reject the external contradiction. A rejection of this type is a commitment to force; force with the intention of eliminating or altering the perceived threat, which, in this case, is two men holding hands. Of

course, the onlooker may not act on this commitment to force, nevertheless, the commitment to change or eliminate the threat still remains in the form of internalized emotions—anger and disgust.

The case of Ted and the onlooker demonstrate that our strong desires for self-preservation have the very real potential of pervading the decisions of our everyday life. Neither men were in any danger of dying, in the physical sense, yet both men may have been highly influenced by what is, essentially, a fear of death. This is because, as I have shown, the fear of death is a much more pervasive motivating force in our lives if what we fear is actually a loss of our *self-conception* or our identity. From this perspective, virtually *anything* can be perceived as a threat to the self so long as it yields some contradiction to a trait that we hold to be fundamental in our identity. So then, it seems that our potential to oppress is bound in our aversion from the loss of our self-conceived identity—our fear of dying.

### **2.3 Ending Oppression as Ending Our Potential to Oppress**

I should say something briefly regarding how this ethic works toward ending oppression. On this account, the aim of eliminating oppression is achieved through eliminating, or working to reduce, our potential for oppression. We may never come to know our actual capacity for oppression unless we happen to find ourselves in circumstances that test our moral limits. It is not enough that we merely *believe* that we are incapable of oppression. For, we could be wrong about this. The best thing to do is to understand our motivations for oppression and their source. And, according to this account, it is our identity and our desire for self-preservation that substantiate acts of oppression. Thus, our potential for oppression is causally bound with our self-conception and our desire for self-preservation. Ridding ourselves of the potential to

oppress, then, requires a deconstruction of self and an aversion from our desires for self-preservation.

If we were able to fully achieve this aim—of deconstructing the self *entirely*—it may be true that we would rid ourselves of the potential to oppress, but it also seems like we would rid ourselves of the desire for self-preservation in the most basic sense: the desire to preserve our bodily integrity, the very thing that keeps us alive. Would we have to give this up, too? Perhaps. The reality is that sometimes in extreme circumstances we will have to choose between preserving our life and conforming to oppressive regimes, for instance. I imagine many people made this choice in Nazi Germany. But, for this account to make progress toward ending oppression, it is not the case that everyone must be willing to die at a moment's notice. For, the force of this account is in gesturing towards the idea that our desires for self-preservation pervade our life in ways that are both mundane and extreme. And we can all make progress in suppressing these desires in our everyday circumstances.

## 2.4 An Ideal Aspiration

A self-deconstructive ethic is an account with an idealistic aspiration. That is, its aspiration hinges on an ideal counterfactual that *if* we were to be fully successful in deconstructing the self *then* we would be freed from possessing the potential for oppression. This is an ideal counterfactual because the truth of the matter is that not many people would be fully capable of deconstructing their entire self-conception. And, according to this account, if there exists *any* circumstance in which a person would be willing to defend their self-conception (even our conception of bodily integrity) by means of force—whether it be physical or psychological in kind—upon another, then that person is not fully freed from their potential for oppression.

The possibility that one would be capable of giving up *all* fear of self-destruction is probably not a practical feasibility; although, I should say, perhaps not impossible. In 1963, a Buddhist monk named Thich Quang Duc sat down in the middle of a busy Saigon street, covered himself in petrol and lit himself on fire. Quang Duc was protesting religious oppression occurring in his country. His last testament read as follows, “Before closing my eyes to go to Buddha, I have the honour to present my words to President Diem, asking him to be kind and tolerant towards his people and enforce a policy of religious equality.”<sup>11</sup> It is arguable whether or not any good came from his actions, or if his actions could be considered morally justifiable. Regardless, Quang Duc felt that he was responding to a grave injustice, and in light of that injustice, he took his own life in an unimaginable manner as an ultimate measure of defiance and civil protest. Sometimes, we are placed in situations in which our only options are to give into oppressive regimes or suffer horrible consequences. Although the thought of execution, burning to death, or the gas chamber might understandably persuade most people to choose oppression, a commitment to the complete annihilation of oppression—and the *ideal* aim of a self-deconstructive ethic—would have us become the kind of person that would choose otherwise.

Even if this ideal of complete self-deconstruction is unattainable for most people, it still points us in the right direction—assuming the direction we wish to follow is one where we rid ourselves from our potential to oppress. From this perspective, we need not all become *Buddhas* before serious strides are made on the path toward ending oppression. Although a Buddha might maintain zero propensity to defend a conception of self and thus zero propensity for acts of oppression, we all have the capacity to, at least, lessen our propensity for oppression. The ideal aim of this account is to transform ourselves into persons with zero potential for oppression,

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<sup>11</sup> Keown, p. 100-101.

however, within this account is also the much more practical aim of working to ensure that our potential for oppression becomes increasingly diminished.

### *Section III “The Relevance of Moral Luck*

#### **3.1 Moral Luck: Reducing Our Potential to Oppress**

The role of moral luck in a self-deconstructive ethic becomes relevant in light of this practical aim. For we may have an aim to diminish our potential to oppress, but as long as we possess some potential, then we must acknowledge that there are, in fact, some circumstances in which we might realize this potential. Whether or not these particular circumstances come to fruition does not necessarily depend on anything that we might will; rather, some of these circumstances might arise as a matter of circumstantial luck. You and I might have the same potential for oppression, however the circumstances I experience result in the realization of this potential, whereas you might be *lucky* enough to go throughout life without this potential ever manifesting. Philosopher Allen Buchanan discusses his lucky ascent from a racist upbringing, saying, “to this day I tremble at the thought of the moral risk my upbringing imposed on me. Given the right circumstances, I might have perpetrated a hate crime.”<sup>12</sup> Imagine a man, perhaps Buchanan at one time, who maintains as a part of his self-conception the belief that having fair skin is a mark of superiority. This kind of belief certainly sets itself up for leading to acts of oppression should the man ever meet someone of differing skin color. But, what if he never ends up encountering anyone of different skin color, and thus never commits any acts of oppression? A person might have a great potential for oppression, but due to circumstantial moral luck, the individual may never realize this potential. In contrast, someone with a very low potential for oppression may

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<sup>12</sup> Buchanan, “Political Liberalism and Social Epistemology.”



find herself in a circumstance of extremely *bad* moral luck, in which case she *does* end up realizing her potential to oppress. But, in any case, the best we can do is attempt to uncover what it takes to diminish one's potential for oppression and then continue on that path toward the ultimate ideal of complete eradication of our potential to oppress.

In this case, and according to a self-deconstructive ethic, our potential for oppression is bound with our desires for self-preservation. Thus, diminishing our potential to oppress will require a diminishment of our desire for self-preservation, and that will require a deconstruction of our self-conception. It is clear then that a person possessing a rigid conception of identity will have a greater potential for oppression, and a person with a more fluid identity will have less potential. This is because a person with a rigid identity is more likely to perceive greater numbers of traits or sets of traits that he takes to be fundamental to his own identity; thus, a person with a rigid identity is more likely to find himself in situations wherein he has the potential to reaffirm or preserve those traits within himself. A person with a fluid identity, however, is less likely to perceive that any particular trait is fundamental to her own self-conception. Therefore, someone with a fluid identity is less likely to be placed in a situation of reaffirming or preserving centrally held identity traits. So, the path toward diminishing our potential to oppress is marked by movements toward a more fluid identity and away from a more rigid identity. Hence it will be important to inquire into the pragmatic elements of cultivating a more fluid identity, I will take up this inquiry in §4.

### **3.2 The Problem of Virtue and Crossing the Great Sea of Luck**

If our potential to oppress manifests itself due to circumstances of moral luck, we might conceive of the project of deconstructing our identity as *enhancing our capacity to overcome greater*

*instances of luck* that would otherwise compel us to act on our desires to oppress. This type of project—of enhancing one’s capacity to overcome bad moral luck—can be interpreted as a central aim for virtue ethics, as well as a self-deconstructive ethic. Interestingly, one might note an inherent tension between the two ethics. On the one hand, virtue ethics is a more explicitly positive account; concerned with cultivating virtues through habit, thus *constructing* the proper character that is amicable for human flourishing. In Aristotle’s words, virtuous action must arise from, “a firm and unchanging state [of character].”<sup>13</sup> A self-deconstructive ethic is much more of a negative account, which warns against the cultivation of *any* trait that we ultimately interpret as fundamental to our self-conceptions, including virtuous character. The distinction between the two accounts, and the motivation for self-deconstruction instead of the constructivist nature of virtue ethics, is best understood once we examine how virtues are intended as means for overcoming moral luck in context of ending oppression.

Aristotle, himself, did not straightforwardly discuss the cultivation of virtues as a means of overcoming moral luck. But, in certain areas of Nicomachean Ethics, his argument seems to suggest that this is at least a part of what our virtues do. For instance, Aristotle certainly talks about the role of luck in terms of our capacity to achieve flourishing. John M. Cooper discusses the relationship between “goods of fortune” and Aristotle’s ethics, indicating that at least one form of luck (i.e. the luck of attaining certain goods in life) holds determinative weight on our potential for flourishing.<sup>14</sup> Further, Aristotle purports one virtue, in particular, as the “crown” of all other virtues, and this is the virtue of magnanimity.<sup>15</sup> And in Aristotle’s description of the magnanimous person, he is one who has a greater capacity to overcome the circumstances of luck, as Aristotle says the magnanimous person, “will...bear himself with moderation towards

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<sup>13</sup> Ed. Welchman, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Cooper, “Aristotle on the Goods of Fortune.”

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, Book IV chapter 3.

wealth and power and all good or evil fortune, whatever may befall him, and will be neither overjoyed by good fortune nor over-pained by evil.” This description seems to suggest that whether or not Aristotle explicitly mentions a purpose of virtue as a means of overcoming the greater circumstances of luck, it seems that he thinks this is a relatively apparent function of our virtue imbued on us by one of the ultimate virtues, magnanimity.<sup>16</sup>

Then, one might ask: If Aristotle’s *constructionist* view enables us to overcome instances of moral luck, then for what motivation would we choose to adopt a self-deconstructive ethic which purports to accomplish the same thing? The most obvious answer, perhaps, is that while both views aim at helping one to overcome instances of moral luck, each view does so with different ultimate ends in mind. For Aristotle, overcoming luck and attaining virtue is for the end of human flourishing, whereas a self-deconstructive ethics is more concerned with ending human oppression. But, nevertheless, it seems that both projects cannot be taken up at the same time. If compelled, one would have to choose which project to take up over the other: the self-constructive view of virtue ethics, or the self-deconstructive view proposed here. This choice poses a moral dilemma—is it morally better to promote human flourishing or is there a greater moral requirement on us to eliminate oppression? I am not exactly sure what the answer is, although it is a compelling question. What I do believe to be true, however, is that the goal of eliminating oppression is fundamentally jeopardized by Aristotelian’s account of virtue and flourishing. And this, assuming that we value the ending of oppression, gives us good reason to be wary of adopting Aristotle’s constructivist view.

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<sup>16</sup> Further, contemporary philosophers such as Lisa Tessman, offer more explicit discussions regarding the role of virtue and overcoming the kinds of moral luck that shapes our character (constitutive moral luck) and thus has the potential of enabling or inhibiting our subjection to oppression (thus altering our capacities to flourish). See Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*.

To see why, consider an analogy inspired by the famous Buddhist parable of “the raft”. Imagine that you are on one side of an open channel of water. Across the channel is another shore, and this shore represents one of your desired ends; in this case, the end that awaits you is the elimination of oppression. The sea of water in between you and this end represents the circumstances of moral luck that could prevent you from crossing the channel and reaching your end. According to a self-deconstructive ethic, the traits that form our rigid conceptions of identity are like weights that pull you down as you attempt to cross the water. The more rigid one’s identity, the more likely one will succumb to the “sea” of moral luck and fail to achieve the end of ending oppression. Conversely, if we achieve a more fluid conception of identity, we will have a greater capacity to rise above the sea of luck in order to achieve our end. In the Buddhist parable, a man seeks to cross a river, and fashions a raft in order to do so. Once the man has safely crossed the river on his raft, the Buddha asks whether or not it would be rational for the man to carry this raft on his back wherever he might go. But, of course, the raft is only as good as its purposes of helping us cross the river, and it only harms us (weighs us down) if we hold onto it otherwise. So the Buddha says, “I have taught doctrine similar to a raft—it is for crossing over, and not for carrying.”<sup>17</sup> Developing virtues as a means of overcoming moral luck is similar to the man who continues to carry his raft once he has crossed the channel. Holding onto our virtues as unchangeable states of character can only harm us once our end of eliminating oppression is met. For, if we are willing to value our virtues, in and of themselves, apart from the end to which they are meant to accomplish (which, in this case, is the end of eliminating oppression) then our virtues might instill *contrary* motivations in us that could jeopardize our pursuit of this end.

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<sup>17</sup> Excerpt derived from Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* pp. 11-12.

For example, consider a physician. In fact, consider a great physician. She possesses all the necessary virtues for achieving her professional end of curing illness, including: medical wisdom, patience, and tactical precision. Now, let us assume that her end becomes fully achieved—all the members of her community are perfectly healthy. If she values her position as a physician (along with the necessary virtues that accompany such a role) in itself, then she would have motivation to act contrary toward her ultimate professional aim of eliminating all sickness. She may be less willing to seek cures for disease, or more willing to exaggerate her expertise. As Allen Buchanan describes, people who come to “identify with their expertise,” are, “prone to exaggerate its usefulness.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly valuing a virtue such as generosity, in and of itself, means valuing it—substantiating it—a part from the desired end that it is meant to achieve. If there is no one left to be charitable for, does this mean that I must seek to create instances of charity? Must I also be committed to the project of keeping people poor? It seems that valuing charity in and of itself runs the danger of lending two contradicting motivations if our ultimate end is the elimination of suffering. For, valuing a virtue like charity in and of itself would have us also value that people remain poor and in need of our help. A self-deconstructive ethic, however, avoids such rigid conceptions of what is valuable as part of our character, and instead focuses on the pragmatic steps we can take toward achieving our ultimate end of ending oppression.

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<sup>18</sup> Buchanan, p. 104.

*Section IV “The Role of Rational Self-Reflection”***4.1 Addressing a Metaphysical Issue**

My aim in this section is to explore the role of rational self-reflection in the project of ending our own internal potential for oppression, and also how we might draw on the capacity for rational self-reflection as a moral standard within our institutions for similar purposes. But, before I go on, I will address a metaphysical worry that might arise if this project is taken too literally. For to say that rational self-reflection is useful moral capacity in the project of cultivating a more fluid identity is to say something about the role of *reason* in the process of self-deconstruction. Reason, or reasoning, is our mental capacity to pursue and acquire truths. Then, to conjecture that reason has role in the process of self-deconstruction might lead one to assume that, as a matter of truth, the self *can be deconstructed*. As discussed before, on an ideal interpretation, this ethic would have us commit to a complete deconstruction of our identities, such that there would be no circumstances in which we would be willing to preserve our self-conceptions at the sake of another’s expense. On this interpretation, serious metaphysical consequences arise if it is *true* that our identities can be deconstructed to such an extreme. For if rational reflection is meant to bring us closer toward ultimately true conclusions, then the truth, according to an ideal interpretation, would ultimately imply that *there is no self*. As such, this conclusion might be taken as a seriously radical metaphysical posit. On the other hand, the practical interpretation of this ethic says that it is within most of our capacities to deconstruct our identities to at least some greater extent. Thus, pursuing our capacities for rational self-reflection need not lead us to the extreme view that there is no self, instead it might lead us to the truth that while the self may not be completely deconstructible, the self is far more deconstructible than what we might otherwise think.

I have yet to argue for or against the plausibility that the self can, as a matter of truth, be entirely deconstructed. But as it turns out, for the purposes of this argument, I do not have to. The metaphysical issue can be sidestepped. For, my interpretation of the word “identity” (a term that often carries with it its own weight of metaphysical baggage), is simply one’s self-conception of oneself; that which is included in what one thinks of herself as. So then, even if a personhood theorist defends some conglomeration of characteristics that are thought to be fundamental for personal identity, this may not, necessarily, be the same conglomeration of characteristics of which one includes in her own self-conception of herself. In other words, that which makes me the same person through time is not necessarily that which I include in my self-conception. The two may certainly overlap—for instance, I may believe, as Derek Parfit does<sup>19</sup>, that my personal identity depends on a kind of psychological connectedness of memories and experiences, and although I might value this kind of connectedness in my own self-conception, I might include other things too: the way my body is shaped, the hometown I live in, or the activities I excel in. My point here is to acknowledge that what we conceive of as ourselves, and thus the things we would be willing to preserve and defend, may be related and yet very much separate from the characteristics that are purported to define a theoretical account of identity.

#### **4.2 Reflection as Deconstruction, A Socratic Pursuit**

On moving toward a more fluid identity, our moral capacity for rational self-reflection holds promise as a tool in deconstructing the self and lending a more fluid identity. When we reflect on our circumstances, rationally, we attempt to discern the truth of our experience from what is false. Someone might try to tell me that I am incompetent, or that I will never amount to anything in life. Without at least some capacity for rational reflection, I might have taken these

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<sup>19</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*.

statements for truth. But, in reflection I am able to realize that these claims have no sound basis, they are just the mere opinion of others. The goal is to let these “defining” claims pass through us, to avoid letting the assumptions of our character “instantiate” us. As the Buddha says, “similar to a raft, [you] should give up even good things; how much more then should you give up evil things.” It is not that we should not become proud when we do good, or feel remorse when we do bad, it is just that there is no need to construct rigid forms of identity based on who we perceive ourselves to be—good or bad. Virtually every one of us has the capacity, upon self-reflection, to deconstruct certain traits that we take to be fundamental in our selves, and thus facilitate a more fluid conception of our own identity.

We can conduct our own self-reflective thought experiment right now: First, imagine a trait belonging to you that, if lost, would lead you to experience internal anguish over its loss. At first, try not to imagine something that is all too serious or life-threatening. Remember, we do not have to be willing to stare death in the face right away. Our practical purpose is to start by letting go of the little things. The best traits to begin imagining are those little things that have large influence over how we perceive ourselves. I think a big (or little) one for many people is having hair. I can empathize with the almost absurd amount of anguish involved in losing one’s hair. After you have some trait in mind, imagine that by some circumstance of luck, the trait is lost to you forever and imagine how such a loss would make you feel. It might seem odd that something as seemingly non-essential as not having hair could cause us so much despair. The point of this thought experiment is to have us reflect on the different ways in which we include things—even obviously insubstantial things—into our self-conceptions. It would seem that there is certainly not much good reason to feel so hurt or threatened by such a small loss of a characteristic that is associated with our person.



Thought experiments like these resonate within a certain Socratic tradition. And, we should look toward this Socratic wisdom in order to understand how rational self-reflection seems to lead to an inherently self-deconstructive path of understanding. A line given by Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* has, at least for me, summarized the wisdom in Socrates' philosophic approach. He says, "The one aim of those who practice philosophy...is to practice for dying and death."<sup>20</sup> In context, there is a literal relevance in this advice since Socrates is quite literally awaiting his death. But, if Socrates meant what he said, and he thought *the aim* of philosophy was to practice death, then perhaps his more famous philosophical strategies can be interpreted from this perspective, as well. The *elenchus*, for instance, was an argumentative method that sought to deconstruct another's position by means eliciting a process of self-reflection—forcing other's to examine the foundations of their own arguments. On one interpretation, you might say that Socrates was merely deconstructing the flawed arguments of his opponents. On this interpretation Socrates' larger "aim" is merely a pursuit of logical clarity. However, on another interpretation, we could see Socrates as not just deconstructing his opponents' arguments, but as *deconstructing them*. I find this latter interpretation more appealing. For, a recurring theme in the Socratic Dialogues is the fervent (and ultimately violent) defenses in response to such forced introspection. So it seems that Socrates deals in the deconstructive challenge of defeating pride as much as he deals in the challenge of defeating arguments. And it makes sense that these two challenges go hand-in-hand: a defeat of one's pride and defeat of one's argument. I think, for many of us, the desire to "be correct" or to "be a knowledgeable person" is a common characteristic in our self-conceptions; that is, more often than not, it is a trait rigidly fixed in our identities. We should see the method of *elenchus*, then, as a powerful tool in which might enable us to subdue our pride and help us to cultivate more fluid identities.

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<sup>20</sup> *Phaedo (64a)*, Ed. C.D.C. Reeve.

### **4. 3 Reflection and Elements of a Self-Deconstructive Ethic within Our Institutions**

Most of the previous discussion has applied to interpersonal circumstances of oppression wherein a person is much more likely to be, at least somewhat, aware of their harmful actions. But a large amount of oppression is perpetuated unconsciously, in consequence of systemic barriers and by way of our institutional structures—the ways in which we create polling districts can disenfranchise certain populations of people; and seeing only posters of white, thin, models might implicitly affect our standards of normative beauty, which might weaken the self-worth of “non-conforming” populations of people. Institutions undoubtedly play a role in forming the kind of moral luck we experience and are subjected to; in the ways that they shape our opportunities, the kinds of information we gather and how we come to perceive ourselves and others in this world—all of which are relevant in our pursuit to rid ourselves of the potential to oppress. The elements of a deconstructive ethics thus far have offered some explanation regarding how we ought to end the potential to oppress within our selves. However, if we are to take the project of ending oppression seriously, then we ought to address the ways in which we can diminish institutional perpetuation of oppression.

To do this, I do not think we must stray too far from the groundwork that has already been laid. Let me recall certain elements of the self-deconstructive ethic that have been discussed thus far. First, this ethic is founded on an ultimate aspiration of ending oppression (§2.1). Second, ending oppression will require ending our potential to oppress, and ending our potential to oppress will depend on our commitment to fostering greater fluidity within our self-conceptions (§2.3). Third, any characteristic of our self that is valued in and of itself (e.g. virtues, or professional titles) carries the risk of instilling in us a contradiction in motivation between the valued characteristic and our commitment to ending oppression (§3.2). And finally, our moral

capacity for self-reflection allows us to critically examine the kinds of things we take to be fundamental in our self-conceptions, and it gives us the opportunity to reflect on our attachments to our pride and eventually allows us to subdue such self-conceptions (§4.2). The strategy I propose in reducing systemic oppression is to, more or less, apply these elements of the self-deconstructive ethic (all of which, thus far, have only been raised in the context of interpersonal oppression) to the standards that we come to accept within the structures of our institutions.

Regarding the first element, we should assume that all institutional aims (e.g. gaining profit, lending services) are restricted by a more fundamental side constraint of reducing their potential for perpetuating oppression and harm.<sup>21</sup> And, for many institutions, reducing oppression is more than a side constraint; it is a fundamental goal to be promoted. We assume, for instance, that institutions of medicine have a goal of eliminating suffering and sickness. Naturally our medical systems will strive to avoid causing oppression and harm more generally. And, our government, similarly, has a fundamental goal of protecting its citizens from harm, oppression or otherwise. It is true that the government, and other institutions, must be careful not to protect against some harms such that they perpetuate worse ones; yet, their ultimate aim is a commitment to the reduction of harm. Even our military (as an extension of our government), is an institution that has (or certainly should have) a fundamental goal of reducing harm and oppression. It would be awful, for instance, to imagine a military that instigates harm and encourages oppressive regimes. Hopefully, our military strives to end violence—even if it chooses to employ violence to do so. But, even when an institution does not naturally possess a

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<sup>21</sup> Here, I include “oppression and *harm*,” for while the reduction of general forms of human harm (as opposed to the more specific harm of oppression) is not necessarily included as an ultimate aspiration in the previous discussion of this account, I do think it is an aim that should be adopted in our institutions. For, any harm that an institution inflicts on its participants will be more likely to trigger one’s desires for self-preservation, thus facilitating the perpetuation of oppression among its participants (recall discussion in §2.2)

goal of reducing suffering (e.g. a bank, perhaps), we still should expect that this institution comply with the side restraint of not contributing to oppression.

I will skip ahead, for a moment, to the third element of this ethic: avoiding contradictions of motivation against our ultimate aims. Our institutions should similarly be structured in such a way as to avoid contradictions in organizational motivation that would compel its participants to act contrary to the fundamental institutional aim of reducing oppression and suffering. When it is the case that organizational motivations are put in place that contradict with other, more fundamental aims, we might refer to this as a *contradiction in teleology*. For instance, hospitals have a fundamental aim to reduce suffering. However, hospitals have other aims, like the aim to increase capital. A contradiction in teleology arises when the aim to produce capital conflicts with the aim to end suffering. For instance, consider a medical system that incentivizes sickness, in lieu of promoting health. This is a recent shift in practice that N. Ann Davis describes:

There has thus been a wholesale retreat from the early twentieth century commitment to pursue preventative and environmental strategies to promote public health in favor of a focus on treating ill individuals, which is surely more profitable for the insurance and pharmaceutical industries.

Surely a hospital's more fundamental aim of reducing sickness and suffering is contradicted when we *incentivize* the very thing that we are trying to end. A deconstructive ethic requires that all institutions uphold a superceding aim of reducing oppression and harm, all additional institutional motivations should not contradict, but should be *compatible* with, institutional aims of avoiding the perpetuation of oppression and human harm more generally.

The fourth element discusses the importance of rational self-reflection in ending oppression. Similar to Socrates' elenchus, we should direct strategies of critical examination and self-reflection toward our institutions and the information they convey to us. For if we are not overly critical of our institutions, then our institutional setting may shape us, or instill messages

in us that are contrary to our end project of freeing ourselves from the potential to oppress. As Allen Buchanan warns, “a person brought up in a racist society typically not only absorbs an interwoven set of false beliefs about the natural characteristics of blacks, but also learns epistemic vices that make it hard for him to come to see the falsity of these beliefs.”<sup>22</sup> Both Davis and Buchanan advocate similar solutions when trying to avoid the risks that are incurred on us due to these “socially inculcated”<sup>23</sup> beliefs. Whether in the context of our larger society or within the context of our institutional structures, we should create social environments that are “friendly to Socrates,”<sup>24</sup> wherein a person is a part of a “social ambiance”<sup>25</sup> that instantiates necessary freedoms and channels available to him to express concerns and question authority when appropriate.

A self-deconstructive ethic, then, suggests that we should not only see rational self-reflection as a useful tool in our own pursuits of identity deconstruction, but we should also abstract this capacity on the kinds of *social* reflections to which we are all subjected. That is, in the same way the Socrates employed critical self-reflection as a means of self-deconstruction, our institutional standards and systems should be subjected to the same sort of critical evaluation and transparency.

The second element, regarding our need to foster fluidity in our self-conceptions, may not translate into a specific standard that we can place on our institutions. But the hope is that if we apply the standards derived from the other three elements (reducing an institutions capacity for harm, avoiding institutional contradictions in teleology and encouraging social epistemological processes of self-reflection) then, at the very least, we may mitigate the constraints our

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<sup>22</sup> Buchanan, p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> Buchanan, 96.

<sup>24</sup> A phrase lent to me from Dr. Kristen Hessler

<sup>25</sup> Davis, 98.

institutions may place on us regarding our project of self-deconstruction, giving the participants within those institutions the space, freedom and confidence that is encouraging toward the process of self-deconstruction.

### *Section V “Conclusion”*

Thinking about this self-deconstructive ethic analytically and philosophically was particularly challenging, because the ideas motivating this ethic came from a place in my heart and life experience. Luckily, as a gay man, I have never experienced any significantly terrible harms of oppression; I have never been assaulted, or discriminated in the work place. However, the heteronormative standards of our society were made clear to me at a very young age. And, living through adolescents with the internal suspicion that I was gay, was nearly unbearable. In my darker moments, I considered whether or not it would be better to die than to live a life in which everything that I had come to value would be stricken from me: a normal family and my own children, social respect, a chance at a political career, perhaps even the love and admiration of my friends and family. A perception of loss to that magnitude is overwhelming, especially for a young person. Many people certainly spoke as if “fags” were worthless, but worse yet, I began to believe in my own insignificance. And, interestingly, although I considered myself to be a friendly and open-minded person, whenever I encountered someone else who I perceived to be gay, anger would spontaneously erupt inside of me. It seemed that a part of me hated them, although I did my best to suppress it.

When you finally overcome that kind of internal anguish, a part of you dies. Someone that you always thought you were no longer exists. But in that absence of a self-conception there

is a sense of freedom—of liberation. And so much of the pain and hatred simply *vanish*. There is great transformative power in coming to terms with self-deconstruction. I set out to philosophically capture the essence of this power and the relationship between our identity and oppression, and I used my own experience as a starting point. Unfortunately, there is much left to explore here. What I have tried to do is capture the *general* picture of oppression, what causes us to oppress, and how we can end it. Oppression, itself though, is an elusive and complex phenomenon. And there is room to consider the nuances of such a phenomenon and whether or not a self-deconstructive ethic is adequate in addressing all forms of oppression that we might encounter. However, as I have found in my own life, the truth of this account is best understood when it is experienced and practiced. The project is certainly frightening, for a letting go of the self is, in a sense, embracing death. But, I take comfort in the words of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, “thou needst not be afraid. The Lords of Death are thine own hallucinations.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Evans-Wentz, p. 166-167.

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