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Empowering Resistance

Comments on Cudd's *Analyzing Oppression*

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Ann Cudd offers us a very thoughtful and thorough theory of oppression grounded in the liberal tradition in *Analyzing Oppression*. Throughout the book, there is a presumption that no adequate theory of oppression can be without a theory of resistance; she offers such a theory in the third part of the book. Cudd's theory of resistance is a direct outgrowth of her theory of oppression (25, 193-4). She holds that an act is a resistant act when it is intended to lessen oppression and is witnessed by someone who is capable of understanding it as a form of revolt meant to lessen or end oppression. Of course, not everyone will recognize the same thing in an act so Cudd

adds the notion of a "similarly situated person" to create a sort of standard of reasonableness for resisters.

I suggest that her theory of oppression and her theory of resistance might better fit together with a theory of empowerment. Such a theory emerges from a study of indirect psychological oppression that affects one's desires and choices. In her discussion of indirect psychological forces of oppression, Cudd suggests that "We should be wary of individuals' preferences that reinforce oppression, even when they are sincerely expressed by oppressed individuals" (181). Cudd offers the example of an African woman who elects to subject her daughter to cliterodectomy because of a culturally induced belief that such surgery makes women more beautiful or desirable. Cudd calls this an example of "deformed desires" which reinforce or maintain oppressive structures. Further, she excludes so-called self-deceptive acts of resistance that actually collaborate with the oppressor.

While I am sympathetic to the issue here - that oppressed people may chose to participate in practices that actually contribute to their own oppression - I have two worries. The first is the tension that arises between this position and Cudd's liberalism. The second worry pertains to Cudd's theory of resistance.

One of the key features of the liberalism Cudd employs is autonomy. An oppressed individual is harmed because of membership in a social group that is adversely affected by some social institutions; actions or experiences that might otherwise carry little meaning, must be read against this background for an individual in an oppressed group. There is a risk, however, that the individual's own actions will always be understood as mediated by this experience of oppression. This risk affects the concept of the liberal individual: it risks assuming that the oppressed individual cannot decide on activities for him or herself and it also

ignores the ways that seemingly oppressive activities can be performed in a resistant manner.

Individuals who choose are exercising their autonomy and while that autonomy may be compromised, for another person to determine that someone's autonomy has been compromised and ban that oppressed person from making the decision may actually be a worse form of perpetuating oppression than allowing the decision to be made. In other words, oppression certainly does affect a person's ability to act autonomously but the efforts to resist that oppression ought not to mirror the same autonomy-eroding mechanisms of oppression even if that means accepting that some oppressed individuals will make bad decisions. We might hold them morally blameworthy for such decisions (though even that depends on the extent that they suffer from false consciousness) but we ought not to keep them from acting on their decisions.

In contrast, Cudd argues that some decisions made by the oppressed harm the social group and thus ought not to be allowed. In measuring the potentially harmful consequences of the action on the social group, Cudd's position obscures the potentially positive consequences of seemingly bad decisions for the individual as well as for the group. By prohibiting an oppressed person from acting, even though the intentions are well meaning, there are harmful effects on that oppressed person's autonomy. Cudd also argues that the oppressed have a moral obligation to resist.

To further make my case, consider an example from domestic violence: Imagine a woman who has escaped her batterer and sought protection in a domestic violence shelter. There, she attends support groups where she learns about the cycle of domestic violence and gets emotional support from advocates and other women victimized by domestic violence, while also working with a social worker to obtain necessary

social services. Now suppose that after spending two weeks in the shelter, this woman decides to return to her domicile—the home she shared with her batterer and their children. She tells her advocate and the other women in her support group that she loves the man who beat her and believes that he made a mistake.

According to Cudd's theory of oppression, we can say that this woman likely has deformed desires and is self-deceptively collaborating with her oppressor. She has been subjected not only to probable systematic violence in her home but also to the sexist culture that reinforces expectations of femininity and masculinity. Her decision to go back to her batterer is harmful to the social group of women (or the somewhat smaller social group of women who have been victimized by domestic violence) in numerous ways. Not only does she subject herself to almost certain future violence, she also sends the message to the police, advocates, social workers, and court personnel who have worked on her case to protect her from exactly the situation which she is now voluntarily entering that their efforts are futile or wasted. The woman as an oppressed person is morally required, according to Cudd, to resist her oppression and we might be morally required to keep her from making the decision to return home.

Notice that there is some element of autonomy assumed in the ascription of responsibility to resist. But keeping the woman from making and acting on her own decision is contrary to valuing her autonomy (and hence the tension in Cudd's account). Cudd appears to argue that the woman is morally blameworthy, which presumes at least some autonomy, and that yet that her desires are deformed such that she must be stopped from acting in a particular way. Moreover, actions that inhibit her autonomy are counter-productive to her individual attempt to overcome oppression as well as the social group's efforts to overcome oppression.

Social workers who work in domestic violence advocacy and social scientists who study it tend to agree that allowing the woman to make her own decisions is more important to her process of overcoming oppression than forcing her to make what we believe would be the “right” decision—to not return to the batterer (Pleck 1987, 190; Vaughn 1977, 113-8; Walker 1984). On average, women leave domestic violence situations 5-8 times before they leave for good. Overcoming domestic violence is a gradual process but each shelter visit, each revelation of abuse to a friend, and every angry tear at herself for believing that ‘this time things would be different’ are elements of her developing empowerment. This is important because one of the chief ways that oppression oppresses is that it erodes autonomy and creates dependency. By allowing the woman to make a decision and act on it, we help her to restore some of that autonomy. Advocates of domestic violence have learned that at this point it is crucial to express concern and remind the woman that supportive networks will remain in place for her but not to block her from making the decision—even when they know it is the wrong one. Liberalism would have us affirm a woman’s autonomy, while perhaps acknowledging the blameworthiness of her actions, not prohibit her from acting through the interventions of fellow citizens or the state.

Cudd rightly articulates the ways that an oppressed person acting on a deformed desire harms the social group, and that it is this harm that motivates the moral requirement that others stop the oppressed person from acting on deformed desires. The example of the victim of domestic violence returning to her batterer certainly illustrates that potential harm as well. But there is another way to consider the consequences of this situation. By allowing the individual woman to make the decision—good or bad—the resisting group might be forced to reevaluate its strategies and scrutinize its practices. Other women—perhaps other women in the women’s shelter where she stayed—might be

discouraged and also cede to the desire to return to a dangerous situation rather than face the uncertainty that lies ahead. But they may also see themselves in her and realize that they too have a choice. That realization is important as it affirms some personal autonomy or empowerment while also challenging the cultural ideology that a woman’s place is in the home. That is, one individual woman’s decision to return to her batterer can also be seen as informing the social group of the availability of options where previously they only saw a warped and painful destiny. This is not advocating that the woman return home. It is merely pointing out how the choice might be seen as breaking some of the cycle of dependency.

My second worry with the idea of deformed desires pertains to Cudd’s theory of resistance: how do we move from being oppressed and having false consciousness or deformed desires to fulfilling our duty to resist? Resistance depends on a context and requires a process of development in the resistor. Here it might be important to point out that there is at least one crucial difference between the victim of domestic violence who decides to return to a batterer and the mother who forces her daughter to undergo cliterodectomy (in addition to the potential recipient of the results of their decisions): in the former, some pre-resistant behavior is present. The victim of domestic violence has sought out a shelter. She has at least made an attempt to break free from the violent relationship even if she later acts on a deformed desire and returns to it. The mother seeking genital surgery for her daughter has no similar pre-resistant or resistant act. Both make choices that function to maintain their oppression and the oppression of their social group. But, as the domestic violence example suggests, overcoming oppression is an ongoing process. Recognizing that the experience of oppression is often situational; that the myriad social groups in which any individual is a part may put one in the role of oppressor, privileged, or resistor depending on the situation; and that moments of opposition to oppression may need to be

combined before any real change or resistance is possible opens a space between oppression and resistance.

What is missing, or where there may be a gap in Cudd's account of oppression and resistance, is empowerment. Elements of Cudd's theory of resistance actually lend themselves to addressing my worry and perhaps laying the groundwork for a more developed theory of empowerment. For instance, she discusses education for freedom and defends it against the charge of totalitarianism. She also acknowledges that there may be both long-term and short-term outcomes that seemingly conflict (though she does not use this long-term/short-term distinction as the example of the domestic violence victim's outcomes does). I suggest the following as a way to begin thinking about a theory of empowerment that addresses the four elements of her theory of oppression and plugs right into her theory of resistance:

Person P begins the process of becoming empowered when P recognizes social group designation X and oppressive social institutions $k_1...k_m$ are more or less arbitrary and contingent or otherwise subject to change through the active involvement of P.

Empowerment would then be further advanced as P obtains adequate availability, opportunity, or resources for P's ability to act in a resistant fashion, take responsibility for overcoming oppression, and achieve desired levels of social, economic, religious, cultural, intellectual, and sexual expression.

Although a full defense of a theory of empowerment is not feasible here, three things are worth noting for the discussion of deformed decisions, liberalism, and resistance above. First, the victim of domestic violence recognizes her situation as unjust or at least unsafe and that recognition compels her to seek shelter. That act is likely not an intentional act of

resistance but merely a strategy for survival. Nevertheless, by taking that action, the woman implicitly acknowledges that her situation is contingent. Second, the time in the shelter where she learned about resources available to her, heard the stories of other victims, and was told of the possibility of a life without domestic violence open the possibility for options that may not have been (and likely were not) open to her prior to coming to the shelter. Third, although she ultimately returned to her batterer in the example, this woman is armed with additional tools that might make the next visit to the shelter an intentional act of resistance rather than a survival strategy.

For many oppressed individuals there may be situations in which they are able to bracket the oppression or the oppressive conditioning and experience themselves as a free person even if only briefly. These are the locations for fostering empowerment and allowing resistance to begin to bud. Of course, I would also want to argue for a theory of political solidarity: a collective response to injustice characterized by moral relations among members of a voluntary social group united by the common goal to end oppression, injustice, or social vulnerability (Scholz 2008).

Cudd's theory of oppression is remarkably thorough and admirably defended. Moreover, I agree with her statement that to articulate a theory of oppression is to participate in resistance in some way. I have argued here that there is nevertheless something of a gap between the theory of oppression and the theory of resistance. That gap might be filled with a theory of empowerment for the individual and solidarity for the group. Not everyone will achieve empowerment instantaneously or simultaneously and certainly not all formerly oppressed will join in the collective actions of solidarity and resistance. As Cudd rightly notes, oppression of all sorts is deeply entrenched in our psyches

and social systems. We have to continue to look for avenues to bring about both personal and social change.

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