

Self-Respect & The Obligation to Resist Oppression

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will argue against the position of Carol Hay, who asserts that the oppressed have an obligation against oppression and that the bare minimum of this obligation is to resist internally. I will demonstrate that resisting internally leaves space for the oppressed to affirm the oppressors' false beliefs. Affirming the oppressor's false belief causes the oppressed person to disrespect themselves. In order to understand why we must first understand what things contribute to our self-respect. Our ability to respect ourselves depends on many factors, but I will focus on two specifically. The first is our *internal/self-image*; this is how we see ourselves. The second is our *external image*; this is how we think people see us. One way we can disrespect ourselves is by causing conflict between these two elements, which undermines our self-respect. Hay's account is grounded on the oppressed person respecting themselves. Therefore, if an oppressed person can disrespect themselves while meeting the bare requirements of the duty to resist oppression, then we need to reconsider the bare minimum of the obligation to resist oppression.

## Self-Respect & The Obligation to Resist Oppression

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### GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss how members of a group unjustly targeted by a more powerful group are obligated to oppose their unjust treatment through physical means, at the very least. Suppose we accept that groups who are unjustly targeted should stand against the systems of injustice. In that case, we must define what counts as opposing unjust treatment. Resistance is any action or inaction that conflicts with the current dynamic between the powerful and the disadvantaged. Due to a sense of self-worth, disadvantaged groups recognize that they must defend themselves against unjust treatment. Forms of resistance restricted to one's mind do not provide the member of a disadvantaged group with evidence that they are valuing themselves appropriately. Therefore, physical resistance is the minimum required demonstration of self-worth from members of underprivileged groups in the fight against systemic injustice.

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## **Introduction**

In the Antebellum South, brimming with racism and prejudice, we find John. John is an enslaved person, and as an enslaved person, John faces constant degradation and negative stereotypes projected onto him. John neither believes these stereotypes nor that he is inferior to his oppressors. Furthermore, John wants to resist this oppression that forces him to remain enslaved. However, overtly resisting the systems of oppression could result in harm or injury. So instead, John decides to resist by deceiving his oppressors. So John plays into the stereotypes that his oppressors project onto him. The oppressors believe that, as a Black person, he is foolish, silly, lazy, and docile; they think that John never really poses a threat because of his inadequacy. So, John assumes the role of a Sambo. In other words, he acts like the fool that they believe him to be so that he can resist without suffering any physical ramifications that may come with more overt resistance.

The oppressors consider John's actions as validation of the stereotypes they project onto Black people. John has succeeded in making his oppressors believe that he is what they generalize him to be, thereby affirming the negative beliefs they had about him. He believes that he has resisted his oppression because he made his oppressors look foolish. After all, they buy into his act, even to the point that sometimes John may materially benefit from the façade that he puts on. But, even if John considers what he is doing to be resistance, can we say that what John is doing is self-respecting? Carol Hay would argue that John is respecting himself because he is resisting his oppression. Hay would argue that by acknowledging that what he is experiencing is oppression, John has fulfilled his obligation of self-respect; however, I argue that merely acknowledging one's oppression is not enough to fulfill a duty of self-respect.

In her work, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression," Hay argues that the oppressed should resist the hegemonic systems that persecute them. This obligation is derived from a greater duty of self-respect. According to Hay, one can fulfill the bare minimum of the obligation to resist oppression by acknowledging that one is oppressed.<sup>1</sup> However, I argue that one can not respect oneself by merely acknowledging one's oppression. To respect oneself, one has to commit to doing more than acknowledging that they are wronged in at least some circumstances. I illustrate this by analyzing the unique position of John, the Sambo, in his attempt to resist oppression. I want to draw out the issue of exclusively acknowledging one's oppression as a form of resistance while attempting to remain self-respecting.

In this paper, I argue that Hay is wrong to think that the bare minimum of the oppressed person's duty to resist oppression is merely to recognize that they are oppressed. Because merely recognizing one's oppression is not sufficient for having self-respect. I will defend this position by demonstrating that oppressed people can disrespect themselves by internally resisting. I show that when the Sambo affirms the false belief of their oppressor by "acting the clown," they are disrespecting themselves.<sup>2</sup> In Section I, I reconstruct Hay's argument for the obligation to resist oppression and explain how, according to Hay, we can fulfill this obligation. In Section II, I will object to Hay's claim that acknowledging that one is oppressed entails that the agent is self-respecting. I will accomplish this by presenting how one can internally resist oppression and disrespect themselves in the process. Specifically, I will show how one can protect oneself from the plight of oppression, but in the process, affirm the oppressor's false belief that one has an inferior rational nature, thereby disrespecting oneself. I conclude by explaining what my objection to Hay's argument entails. In demonstrating that Hay's proposal does not fulfill the

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, volume 42, (2011): 46.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Elkins, *Slavery* (The University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 83.

obligation of self-respect, I prove that the bare minimum of resistance must include some action from the oppressed. Instead, the bare minimum of one's obligation to resist must require the oppressed to act to some extent.

## **Section I**

According to the Kantian framework that Hay employs, the capacity to be rational is intrinsically valuable.<sup>3</sup> Human beings should be valued because we are, by nature, rational. We value human beings by respecting this rational nature. The respect of this rational capacity is not voluntary but obligatory. This duty of respect for one's rational capacity not only extends to others but encompasses respect for ourselves as well. Therefore, a duty of self-respect is present among the oppressed. However, Hay argues that oppression interferes with the oppressed person's ability to be self-respecting.<sup>4</sup> To fulfill the duty of self-respect, the oppressed must first combat their oppression.

Hay contends that oppression harms, thereby disrespect, the practical rationality of those subjected to it.<sup>5</sup> Oppression disrespects the rational capacity of the oppressed because it can harm their rational capabilities. Hay asserts that oppression can harm one's rational capacity in two ways.<sup>6</sup> First, oppression can damage our rational capacities. One's rational capacity is damaged when it is threatened in a way that endangers its future functions. The second way oppression can harm our rational capacities is restriction; one's rational capacity is restricted when there is a temporary interference with one's ability to exercise it fully.

Oppression threatens to damage or restrict one's rational capacities, which disrespects one's rational nature. To fulfill one's duty of respecting their rational nature, one must prevent

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, volume 42, (2011): 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

harm as the kind that oppression ensues. Resisting oppression prevents the potential impairment that it causes to one's rational capacities. Therefore, the oppressed have an obligation to resist oppression as an extension of their obligation to respect their rational capacities.

The provided argument for the obligation to resist oppression has demonstrated that the oppressed can prevent their rational capacities from being damaged or restricted by resisting. Hay addresses a potential counter-argument regarding how demanding the obligation to resist oppression can be in providing how one is to fulfill this obligation.<sup>7</sup> Given the moral seriousness of resisting oppression, it might seem that one would have a perfect duty to resist, that is, to resist at every occurrence of oppression. However, the systems that perpetuate and reproduce oppression are too irrepressible. The oppressed can neither shed their oppression nor lighten it; rather, it is ever-present and suffocating. Oppression is as consistent and overwhelming as heavy rain. It would be impractical to request someone catch as much rain as possible to prevent them from being saturated; the task would be too taxing. Asking for the oppressed to resist at every occurrence of oppression would be too demanding.

As a rebuttal to the objection of demandingness, Hay asserts that our obligation to resist oppression is an imperfect duty, which gives our actions of resistance and our inactivity toward oppression latitude.<sup>8</sup> An imperfect duty in the Kantian sense is a duty that does not have to be fulfilled every time its conditions are met, which is when a subject is oppressed. An imperfect duty allows for latitude in what responses one has to oppression. Hay identifies two ways in which the duty to resist oppression affords latitude to the oppressed.<sup>9</sup> The first is latitude in action, and this provides the subject with flexibility regarding what actions they take. The second is latitude in refraining from action, and this regards the ability to perform or refrain from an

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<sup>7</sup> Carol Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, volume 42, (2011): 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

action on occasion. These latitudes are distinct in that latitude of action may provide flexibility in what action to take but does not excuse one from acting at all; that is something only latitude in refraining from action can provide. Hay argues that one could demonstrate the latitude of action in multiple ways.<sup>10</sup> For example, one could engage in activism, actively speak out against oppression, or opt out of oppressive social norms. Hay asserts that activism, speaking out, and opting out are external forms of resisting; however, there are also internal forms.<sup>11</sup> External forms of resistance are forms of resistance that demonstrate the oppressed dissent of the current system to the oppressors. These actions take place in the physical world, and they can be observed. Internal forms of resistance allow the oppressed to fulfill their obligation to resist oppression by establishing that they are the sort of person whose rational nature is "simply not damaged by oppression."<sup>12</sup> Hay claims that one could do this by erecting "mental walls" so that one's rational capacity is not damaged.<sup>13</sup> These walls are any mental mechanism that can assure that the oppressed predilections are against oppression. Creating these mental walls could be educating oneself on the harms of oppression or refusing to accept the social messages that oppression enforces.

Hay argues that an internal form of resistance can be the last mode of resistance for the oppressed to invoke safely.<sup>14</sup> External resistance places the oppressed at potential risk of physical harm, which can sometimes result in maiming or fatality. Because dying or injury is not conducive to one's obligation of self-respect, the oppressed may choose to resist internally. Hay argues that to avoid the physical risk of external resistance, there may be nothing an oppressed person can do to resist besides simply "recognizing that something is wrong" with one's

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<sup>10</sup> Carol Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, volume 42, (2011): 31.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

situation.<sup>15</sup> Recognizing something is wrong with one's situation consists of remaining steadfast in the face of all the forces trying to convince you that there is nothing better for you other than oppression. Hay suggests that there is "something importantly self-respecting about engaging in internal resistance" and that the possibility of this form of resistance captures the intuition that there are methods to satisfy the duty to resist oppression even when external forms are unwise.<sup>16</sup>

The intuition that internal resistance is a sufficient method to satisfy the obligation to resist oppression is promoted by Hay regarding the latitude of refraining from action. The latitude in refraining from action allows one to refrain from acting when the conditions of oppression are met. Latitude in refraining from action while fulfilling an obligation to resist oppression still requires one to protect themselves from the harms of oppression. A maxim to protect one's rational capacity is still present, so refraining from acting to the point that one's rational capacity is compromised is impermissible. Hay analogizes oppression to droplets of water eroding a rock.<sup>17</sup> One would not be obligated to stop every droplet but protect the stone from detectable erosion. Responding to oppression in this way may be necessary for the oppressed because resisting every oppressive situation will be too taxing.

The convenience of internal resistance allows one to fulfill this obligation while refraining from any action. Internal resistance does not require the oppressed to behave or act in a certain manner. According to Hay's duty to resist oppression, the oppressed should resist to the point that their rational capacities are protected. If an oppressed person refrains from resisting oppression to the point that their rational capacity is injured, then they have failed to fulfill the obligation to resist oppression. Externally resisting, as mentioned earlier, may entail some risk to

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<sup>15</sup> Carol Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, volume 42, (2011): 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

the wellbeing of the oppressed. Refraining from resisting externally may be an act of prudence, but this still leaves one's rational capacity vulnerable to damage. If one refrains from external resistance, they must protect their rational capacity from damage by other means. Internally resisting allows the oppressed to resist without any harm that may be included with external resistance. By internally resisting, one prevents their rational capacity from being harmed while refraining from action.

While the oppressed may still be subject to physical harms of oppression, they can at least protect the future functions of their rationality. Preventing themselves from accepting the unjust circumstance they are enduring as acceptable. Internally resisting allows one to evade the demandingness of the duty to resist oppression while still fulfilling it. Internal resistance makes it possible for the obligation to resist oppression to be fulfilled without acting on every occasion. Hay argues that the duty to resist oppression always requires at least internal resistance.<sup>18</sup> Any argument that states that even internal resistance is not required is not going to be sufficient. If we can not resist externally (because it is too demanding), then we should at the very least resist internally. Hay states that "any argument attempting to claim that not even internal resistance is required in a given circumstance is, in effect, going to be an argument for why someone does not have to be self-respecting in this circumstance".<sup>19</sup> However, I am not convinced that every instance of internal resistance is a portrayal of self-respect.

## **Section II**

In this section, I will object to Hay's claim that internal resistance is the bare minimum of our obligation to resist oppression.<sup>20</sup> This objection will show that resisting oppression requires more than merely internally resisting. Instead an oppressed agent has to externally resist in some

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<sup>18</sup> Carol Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, volume 42, (2011): 46.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

way to be considered to be resisting at all. I will demonstrate that it is possible for someone to internally resist and fail to satisfy the obligation to resist oppression because they disrespect themselves in the process. Disrespecting oneself is salient for this argument because Hay believes the oppressed have to be self-respecting to resist. Hay thinks that resistance is how the oppressed respect themselves; however, I argue in this section that one can resist internally yet fail to be self-respecting. Therefore, internal resistance failing to incite self-respect will discount it as the bare minimum to resist oppression.

To argue that internal resistance is not sufficient for fulfilling the duty to resist oppression, I offer an example of an oppressed person who could be said to be internally resisting without respecting themselves. Consider John, an enslaved man who fulfills the Sambo archetype. As someone who fulfills this archetype, John frequently acts as a clown to protect himself from his master's violence. In acting the clown, John performs many of the behaviors outlined by Stanley Elkins in his discussion of the Sambo archetype:

"Sambo, the typical plantation slave, was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness, and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration."<sup>21</sup>

John is aware that he is oppressed and chooses to protect himself from the physical violence of oppression by merely telling himself what is happening to him is despicable, and nobody should be in his position.

According to Hay's interpretation, John is fulfilling his duty to resist oppression. Hay would claim that if the only thing you do to protect yourself is acting a clown, but you are still internally resisting, you are still fulfilling your duty of self-respect. I argue, by contrast, that

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley Elkins, *Slavery* (The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 82.

internal resistance allows for behavior like acting a clown, which I show is self-disrespecting.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, internal resistance alone is not enough to be the bare minimum of the oppressed obligation against oppression. Even if John internally resists while acting a clown, he is still failing to respect himself and thus to fulfill his duty to resist oppression.

Why should we think that John is failing to respect himself? What makes acting a clown disrespectful is that it affirms the oppressors' false belief that the oppressed have an inferior rational nature. John's behavior is designed to mimic the disrespectful stereotypes that his oppressors have projected onto him. These stereotypes stem from the belief that slaves like John possess an inferior rational nature. By playing into these stereotypes, John is affirming his oppressors' beliefs. As I will argue, we can not respect ourselves if we simultaneously affirm another person's false belief that we are inferior.

The claim that I made in the previous paragraph needs unpacking. To understand why affirming a disrespectful belief is itself self-disrespecting, we must first understand what self-respect involves. Our ability to respect ourselves depends on many factors, but I will focus specifically on the two factors that Stanley Coopersmith discusses in his work regarding self-esteem.<sup>23</sup> The first is our internal or self-image, which is how we see ourselves. The second is our external image, which is how we think people see us (regardless of how they actually see us). An example of an internal image would be if a teenager, we shall call her Sally, sees herself as a fantastic dancer. When Sally pictures herself, she sees someone who is graceful and majestic on the dance floor. However, Sally's external image is that she thinks everyone sees her as a terrible dancer, all of her friends and family constantly tell her that she is a clunky and awkward

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<sup>22</sup> The argument I am putting forth is contrary to the one presented by Thomas Hill in "Servility And Self-Respect." Hill argues that it is morally permissible for a person to consciously waive their rights not to be servile if they have a morally commendable motive. Hill gives the example of The Uncle Tom, who avert the dire consequences of overt resistance.

<sup>23</sup> Stanley Coopersmith, *The Antecedents of Self-esteem*. (W.H. Freeman, 1967)

dancer. If someone were to ask Sally if she is a good dancer, she could say, "I think I am, but other people do not think so." Sally says this because she uses both her internal and external image to determine the reality of her dancing abilities. As I will explain later, in the case of self-respect, both our internal and external image must present a reality of us having a valuable rational nature. We must not only see ourselves as having a valuable rational nature, but we must think that others see this also. One way to commit a disrespectful act is by causing conflict between these two elements; in causing this conflict, we bring about the potential to become self-disrespecting.

A conflict between our internal and external images can happen when we are confronted with situations that make it obvious that people view us in ways that we do not view ourselves. For example, if I see myself as a kind person, but everyone around me sees me as a mean and malicious person, I need to reconsider how I view myself. I may need to rethink how I view myself because we want our internal image to represent who we are in the world accurately. Within the world, other people can observe our behavior, and they can attest to whether we are who we think we are or not. A major way we test our reality is by comparing who we think people see us as to who we think we are.

We are now in a better position to see why affirming the false beliefs of oppressors is an act of disrespect toward ourselves. Let us begin with a clarification; I am claiming that the act of affirming the oppressors' false beliefs is disrespectful. This act does not necessarily make the oppressed self-disrespecting as a person. One can do this disrespectful act and be a self-respecting person. To see what makes this act disrespectful, we must first recognize that we can be provided evidence about how others see us. For example, if a group of people constantly tell me that I am dumb, then I have evidence that people see me as a dumb person. I could

potentially take this as lousy evidence and believe that people do not see me as dumb. However, while this person's view of me may not be evidence that everyone sees me as dumb, this is still evidence that a person other than myself sees me as dumb. This other person's perception of me is still a part of the general perception, and therefore it has to be factored in. My belief that someone ought to view me a certain way because of the evidence provided can be completely separate from how this person actually views me. The belief of how someone ought to view me provided the evidence then informs how I think people see me, which informs what I consider the reality of my intelligence.

I recognize that it is not some people's intuition that John would acknowledge the master's perception of him. The example of John seems to only capture how he thinks his oppressor perceives him while ignoring other individuals who could contribute to his external image. For example, if John were to don the role of a Sambo in front of his oppressors but while in the slave quarters were to revert to his normal self, we could imagine that John would also take other slaves' potential perception of him into account. The other slaves perhaps know of John's Sambo ruse. The slaves may have a level of respect for John for deceiving their master. This respect from the other slaves would fortify a positive external image for John. The distance that John could create between the role he assumes to protect himself and who he is in front of allies may relieve the pressure of him affirming his oppressor's false belief. In this case, it would seem as if John would not be so inclined to regard the belief that he has an inferior rational nature. Rather John would feel as though he has some power over his oppressor.

While this thought process may be valuable because it compels us to take John's interaction with other slaves into account, I do not think this frees John of the fact that he has evidence that others see him as a being with an inferior rational nature. I think that while John

can reinforce his belief that others see him as a person with a valuable rational nature by engaging with other slaves and people who are not his oppressors, John still has evidence that others see him as a being with an inferior rational nature which will then contribute to his external image. I reassert that my argument is not to claim that affirming the oppressors' false belief will make John a self-disrespecting person; Rather, the act of affirming the oppressors' false belief is self-disrespecting. So the claim that John is an overall self-respecting person because he has a community of people that reaffirms his belief that others perceive him as a person with a valuable rational nature can coexist with my actual claim. My claim is that by giving one's oppressor evidence that they have an inferior rational nature, an act that resultantly negatively contributes to one's external image, one is committing an act of self-disrespect. The occasion of self-disrespect need not be a determining factor of one's self-respecting character. To illustrate this point, let us look at *The Seven Idiots Example*.

### ***The Seven Idiots Example***

Imagine that Ed is walking through a school with some of his friends. As he walks, he passes a room with the seven most obtuse people in the entire school. As Ed looks inside, his friends bet him that he can not pretend to be so dumb that the seven people in the room kick him out. Ed accepts the challenge and walks in, and assumes the role. Eds behaves as a complete dolt, and just as the bet required, the seven people in the room ask him to leave. As he walks to join his friends, who are laughing and praising his performance, Ed thinks about the fact that he just got kicked out of the room by the stupidest people at school for being too stupid!

Those who believe that John can ignore the reality that he has given his oppressor evidence to see him as someone with an inferior rational nature may share a similar intuition in the *Seven*

*idiots Example.* Just as John has his fellow slaves to bolster his beliefs about how others see him, Ed has his friends to fortify his belief that other people see him as a non-stupid person. One may believe that Ed has fooled the seven idiots and has some type of power over them, in the same way, John has deceived his master. But it becomes very apparent that there are two distinct realities that Ed must face. First, he deceived seven people into believing that he was dumber than them. The second is that he has gotten kicked out of a room by the seven most moronic people in the entire school. Regardless of how Ed chooses to accept this evidence of how others see him, these realities contribute to Ed's external image. Because Ed contributed to the seven stupidest people's belief that he is dumber than them, which contributes to his external image, Ed disrespects himself.

In the case of the oppressed, the oppressor provides evidence that they do not see the oppressed as a person with a valuable rational nature. The oppressor provides this evidence by literally telling the oppressed that they lack personhood and by ridiculing how the oppressed behave and their way of living, claiming that this style of living is inferior and degrading. The oppressor would claim that to live like the oppressed would be to disrespect oneself. This evidence informs the oppressed person's external image, which results in the oppressed thinking that others see them as not self-respecting. When the oppressed affirms the oppressor's false belief that they have an inferior rational nature, they provide their oppressor with evidence that they do indeed have an inferior rational nature. This affirmation is possible because the oppressed can provide evidence to others that informs their external image. When this evidence is provided, the oppressed have reason to believe that the oppressor ought to view them as inferior. The oppressed can give the oppressor reasons to see them as inferior; however, this does

not entail they will see them in this manner but simply that if they take the evidence into account, they have reason to do so.

Now because the oppressed think that others see them as someone with an inferior rational nature because they have given them a reason to, the oppressed may question their reality because their internal and external image do not resemble each other. The internal image of the oppressed will not necessarily be affected by their external image, but the dissonance will give reason to question whether they have an inferior rational nature. This dissonance can occur because one's internal image and what one takes to be reality are two different things. While I can see myself as a genius, in reality, if I am a genius, then others should also be able to see my genius. So while I may see myself as a genius, I use how others see me as confirmation of the reality of my genius. If I only accept how I see myself as reality and never test it against what I think others see me as, I could be considered delusional. Therefore, to test my reality, I compare my internal image to my external image, and if they do not align with each other, I have reason to question my reality. I want to emphasize that the oppressed may or may not question their reality due to the conflict between their internal and external images. Still, for my argument, all that matters is that questioning one's reality is a potential consequence of affirming the oppressors' false beliefs.

So if the oppressed person's internal image of having a valuable rational nature is contrasted to their external image of them having an inferior nature, then they have reason to question the reality of them having a valuable rational nature. Affirming the oppressors' false beliefs gives the oppressed a reason to doubt their reality because they have contributed to an external image that conflicts with the image of them having a valuable rational nature. Questioning whether you have a valuable rational nature impedes your ability to value your

rational nature. Because valuing one's rational nature requires one to believe that one has a valuable rational nature. If one is uncertain if their rational nature is valuable, then their ability to value it would be hindered. Valuing your rational nature is important for Hay's account because Hay defines self-respect as to "recognize the value of the rational nature within us and respond accordingly."<sup>24</sup> So affirming the oppressors' false beliefs can make one question their reality of having a valuable rational nature. Questioning whether one has a valuable rational nature hinders one from actually valuing their rational nature. Failing to value one's rational nature is a failure to be self-respecting.

So affirming the oppressors' false belief has the potential of making one a self-disrespecting person. I want to clarify on my account that the oppressed person's ability to be self-respecting need not be affected. Rather than the act of affirming the oppressors' belief unlocks the potential that one could become a self-disrespecting person, which is enough to make the act disrespectful. So affirming the oppressors' belief makes it possible for the oppressed to be self-disrespecting. Nothing that provides us an opportunity to be a self-disrespecting person should be considered self-respecting. We would consider an act that makes it possible for one to be a self-disrespecting person a self-disrespecting act. Therefore, affirming the oppressors' false beliefs is a disrespectful act.

Let's now tie this back to Hay's account. Hay thinks that to respect ourselves; we must "recognize the value of the rational nature within us and to respond accordingly."<sup>25</sup> So what it means to see myself as someone respectable is to recognize me as someone who has a valuable rational nature. As I have argued, we must identify ourselves as having a valuable rational nature and believe that others recognize us as having this rational nature. So when we affirm the

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<sup>24</sup> Carol Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, volume 42, (2011): 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

oppressors' false belief that we have an inferior rational nature, we are inadvertently providing ourselves with evidence that we do not have a rational nature worth valuing. Therefore, by affirming the oppressors' false beliefs, we disrespect ourselves. When we are disrespecting ourselves while internally resisting, we demonstrate that internal resistance in the absence of external resistance can not fulfill the duty of self-respect, which is imperative for resisting oppression. Therefore, the bare minimum of the duty to resist oppression should require the oppressed to resist externally.

Somebody could object to my argument about the insufficiency of mere internal resistance in at least two different ways. First, an objector could argue that my argument raises the bar too high, insofar as it would make it very difficult to be fully self-respecting in the face of oppression. If it is the case that the oppressed respect themselves, then they should resist oppression. However, I demonstrated that the bare minimum of resisting oppression requires the oppressed to resist in some way externally. External resistance can potentially put the life and wellbeing of the oppressed in jeopardy. So the choice for the oppressed in some instances is reduced to either die or disrespect yourself. While there may be less extreme cases, it is clear that even those choices are not ones that the oppressed can be happy to have. For this objection, I am willing to concede this conclusion but deny that it poses a challenge to my argument. One of the things that makes oppression so heinous and unique as moral harm is that it makes it hard to be self-respecting as an oppressed person. Pointing out that it is tough to be self-respecting as an oppressed person is thus not an objection to my claim.

Second, one might object that my argument commits us to the implausible conclusion that neither internal nor external resistance can satisfy the duty of self-respect. External resistance, after all, often also fails to get oppressors to view oppressed people as self-respecting.

Even if an oppressed person committed themselves to externally resisting through protesting, this would not necessarily change the oppressors' perspective of whether the oppressed are self-respecting. This implication that external resistance is only self-respecting if it changes the views of their oppressor is implausible. Many acts of external resistance seem to be obviously self-respecting, such as escaping slavery or refusing to be degraded. My claim is not that we need to change how the oppressor sees us but how we think they ought to see us.<sup>26</sup> So in the practice of protest, what the oppressed are trying to do is not necessarily change the mind of their oppressors but provide evidence that would justify the oppressed changing their minds. Protest gives the oppressed reasons to believe that their oppressor should see them as self-respecting. Put another way, the oppressed need not change the way oppressors perceive them. Instead, they must provide evidence that the oppressor needs to change their mind about the oppressed. Providing this evidence does not require them to actually change their mind, but the evidence should be enough to where they are justified in doing so. Therefore, external resistance provides the oppressor with evidence that the oppressed are self-respecting. On the other hand, internal resistance does not provide evidence that the oppressors ought to believe that the oppressed are self-respecting. One can disrespect themselves on purpose while internally resisting because internal resistance does not require any action other than knowing what is happening to you is wrong. However, simply knowing that one is experiencing oppression does not protect oneself from the disrespect one produces. A person can not present themselves as totally self-disrespecting and claim that they resist oppression by simply knowing that they are oppressed.

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<sup>26</sup> My argument closely resembles Bernard Boxill's in "Self-Respect and Protest." Boxill argues that the oppressed person is "his own emphatic statement." Boxill claims that by the oppressed person protesting, they affirm their rights. I draw inspiration from Boxill to argue that the oppressed person has to provide evidence that they are a self-respecting person. The oppressed show evidence through external acts to prove they fulfill the self-respect quota.

Now, let's turn back to John, the enslaved man who protects himself from his oppressor's violence by playing into the 'Sambo' archetype. John decides to resist internally because the physical ramifications of external resistance are too steep. However, by choosing not to resist externally, he still commits himself to affirm his oppressors' beliefs about the inferiority of his rational nature. Affirming someone's belief that they have an inferior rational nature is disrespectful regardless of whether one aims to protect themselves from the plight of oppression by doing so. Therefore, John has disrespected himself while protecting himself. To disrespect himself while protecting himself means that John has failed to fulfill the obligation to resist oppression. John, failing to fulfill the obligation to resist oppression while internally resisting, demonstrates that the duty to resist oppression can not be fulfilled through mere internal resistance.

### **Conclusion**

I have presented an argument against Hay's position that, while under the plight of oppression, internally resisting can fall short of fulfilling the obligation of self-respect. I have demonstrated this by showing that one can disrespect themselves while internally resisting. Having shown that Hay's analysis of the bare minimum to resist oppression is insufficient, I will conclude this work by addressing further considerations regarding replacing internal resistance as the bare minimum of fulfilling the obligation to resist oppression.

My objection to Hay's bare minimum allows us as philosophers to analyze the ethics of resisting oppression and rethink the limitations of resistance. A bare minimum is necessary for establishing moral imperatives because it delimits the least amount of action or involvement required to fulfill a duty. An imperfect duty needs a bare minimum to demarcate to the agent what is fulfilling the duty and what is not. Establishing a new bare minimum would provide an

agent with knowledge of how little they can do before it can no longer be considered satisfying the duty. A new bare minimum would have to satisfy the exact requirements that internal resistance fails to meet. Internal resistance is not enough to be considered the bare minimum of resisting oppression because it allows agents to disrespect themselves occasionally. Simply acknowledging that one is oppressed would not suffice as fulfilling the duty to resist oppression. This new limitation must also be more sensitive to the obligation of self-respect. It would seem that this new bare minimum would have to include some form of external resistance to be sufficient. Regardless of what this new bare minimum may look like, it will require the oppressed to act in some fashion, even with the risk of potential harm or death. This bare minimum can take the form of vocal resistance. The oppressed may need to vocalize their disapproval of the hegemonic systems to provide themselves with evidence of what their oppressors ought to believe. Perhaps the bare minimum is some act of rebellion, regardless of how small, against the convention of structural oppression. For example, if it is conventional for a person of color not to pursue a particular career because it is understood to be occupied exclusively by white people, then simply applying for this position is an act of resistance. These may only be proposals; however, I have established that self-respect in the face of oppression is a much more complex phenomenon than Hay allots in her work. When establishing limitations for the duty to resist oppression, we should consider this.

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