

“Ineffective” Aggression, Symbolic Protest, and Self-Respect

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April 12, 2018

1 Introduction: Two Kinds of “Ineffective” Action

Two kinds of “ineffective” action present puzzles for understanding what one may do in the face of a threat. Symbolic protest, protesting an injustice when it is known in advance that the protest will not avert or rectify the injustice, seems to be permissible even in cases where undertaking to protest inflicts some harm on those responsible for the injustice. For instance, it seems as though one may engage in an act of protest even if one’s targets are such that protesting against them will cause them severe psychological harm. More realistically, albeit more controversially, it seems that one may engage in acts of vandalism or property destruction against the perpetrators of injustice, at least when said perpetrators are unlikely to face legally sanctioned punishment, even if such acts of destruction serve no purpose other than expressing outrage at the relevant injustice. Second, it seems permissible to inflict some (proportionate) harm on an aggressor even if one knows in advance that the harm will not stop or prevent the aggression.¹ Suppose that you are trying to break my leg. It seems that I may break your wrist even if I know that it won’t stop you from breaking

¹Statman, 2008, p. 664; Frowe, 2014, p. 99.

my leg. In both cases, the Success condition, S, on justified defensive action is violated. S holds that an otherwise immoral action, such as inflicting non-trivial risks on others or administering harms to others, can constitute a justified act of self-defense only if it is likely to avert a threat. Despite violating S, both sorts of ineffective action seem permissible. One might be tempted to reject S but, as Daniel Statman notes, S is entailed by the widely endorsed Necessity (N) and Proportionality (P) constraints on self-defense.² More on this below.

In section two I discuss the success condition and its relation to N and P. In section three I introduce several cases of symbolic protest and one case of “ineffective” self-defense. In section four I discuss the view, defended by Daniel Statman and Helen Frowe, that “ineffective” action in fact defends against threats to honor. In particular I argue that their account, while interesting, stands in need of significant clarification. In section five I discuss Thomas Hill’s account of symbolic protest and argue that his account cannot accommodate the full range of cases of symbolic protest. In section six I introduce the notion of self-respect and argue “ineffective” action in fact defends against threats to self-respect. In section seven I discuss the question of whether one is obligated to act in order to defend oneself-respect. Finally, in section eight I argue that my account does not entail any objectionable sort of victim blaming.

2 Conditions on Self-Defense

The conditions on justified self-defense are as follows:

Necessity (N): An act of violence constitutes a justified act of self-defense against a particular threat only if it is the least harmful means of averting that threat.

²Statman, 2008, p. 659.

Proportionality (P): An act of violence constitutes a justified act of self-defense only if it produces good outcomes commensurate to the bad outcomes it produces.

Success (S): An act of violence constitutes a justified act of self-defense against a particular threat only if it is likely to avert that threat.

As Daniel Statman notes, S is not usually listed in the conditions for justified self-defense, though it is listed in the conditions for *jus ad bellum*.³ In this section I will briefly recapitulate Statman's argument to the effect that the widely held N and P constraints on self-defense entail the S.

N holds that in order for an act to constitute a justified act of self-defense it must be the least harmful means of averting the relevant threat.⁴ For an act to be the least harmful means of a threat it must be a means of averting a threat, thus for an act to be necessary for self-defense it must also be successful.⁵ But the success of a defensive act does not show that it is necessary, so N entails but is distinct from S.

Statman also argues that the Proportionality constraint, P, entails S. The idea is that if the defensive action (or war) is proportionate, i.e. if it produces good outcomes commensurate to the bad outcomes it produces, then it is successful. This seems correct. If a defensive action fails to even mitigate the threat at which it is directed, then it produces no good outcomes whatsoever. Since inflicting harm is bad, ineffective defensive actions thus produce no good outcomes and some bad outcomes, meaning they are disproportionate.

³Statman, 2008, p.659, p. 663.

⁴Frowe, 2014, p.88.

⁵Statman, 2008, p. 663-4; Uniacke, 2014, p.66.

3 Cases

3.1 Symbolic Protest

Anti-Fascist: An elderly Jewish woman living in Nazi Germany with no financial or political ties to the Nazi party wishes to protest the actions of the Nazis.⁶

Suppose that she does so.

Suppose that the Nazis were psychologically fragile to the point where being confronted with a challenge to their authority would induce in them a severe panic attack. Even were this so, and even if the protagonist in Anti-Fascist knows in advance that her protest will have no positive effect on the actions of the Nazis, it still seems permissible for her to engage in her act of protest. But *prima facie* the success condition would not be satisfied were the woman in Anti-Fascist to engage in protest.

Charlie Hebdo: After the terrorist attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, Parisian citizens took to the streets in protest of the shooting.⁷

Clearly the protests in the wake of *Charlie Hebdo* were morally permissible. However, it is also clear that they ran some risk of prompting further attacks, which might have harmed even those who did not engage in the protests. Normally it would be wrong to impose such a risk, but in this case it seems that it is not. However, as with the prior cases, the success condition seems not to be satisfied in this case. The threat to which the protests were a response could no longer be averted by the time the protests occurred.

My verdict is that in both cases the protests were morally permissible, and thus that a test of a theory of “ineffective” action is that it can accommodate this verdict. Having given the cases of symbolic protest with which I will be concerned, I will now turn to cases of “ineffective” self-defense.

⁶This case is adapted from Hill, 1979, p. 84.

⁷BBC, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30765824>.

3.2 Ineffective Self-Defense

Rape: Eric is in the midst of culpably raping Fran. Eric is much bigger and stronger than Fran and consequently there is nothing she can do to stop him from continuing to rape her. While being raped, Fran threatens to break Eric's wrist, though she knows this will do nothing to stop the rape from occurring. The only way Eric can stop Fran breaking his wrist is to quickly break her wrist first.⁸

Intuitively, it is permissible for Fran to break Eric's wrist and it is not permissible for Eric to use force to stop her. However, if we accept that S holds for self-defense, then it would seem that the reverse holds. That is, if S is a genuine condition on self-defense, then it would seem that it is impermissible for Fran to break Eric's wrist and permissible for Eric to use force to stop her. This is because if S holds and there is no other threat which Fran's breaking Eric's wrist defends against, then Fran's trying to break Eric's wrist would be an unjustified threat, and Eric would seem to be justified in responding accordingly. This result is obviously absurd, so a theory of "ineffective" action must explain why it is permissible for Fran to break Eric's wrist and impermissible for Eric to stop her.

4 Statman and Frowe on Ineffective Self-Defense

Daniel Statman and, following him, Helen Frowe defend the permissibility of putatively unsuccessful defensive action on the grounds that in cases in which the protagonist is treated by the antagonist in a manner that refuses to recognize their moral status, there is in fact a threat which the "unsuccessful" defensive action in fact successfully defends against. In particular, in addition to the primary threat (of rape, murder, or other physical or psychical harm), the protagonists face a secondary threat to their honor, honor being "the value of a

⁸Quong and Firth, 2012, p.689, quoted and slightly adapted by Helen Frowe in her 2014, p. 99.

person in [their] own eyes, but also in the eyes of [their] society,”⁹ which derives from the degrading nature of the primary threat.¹⁰ In treating the protagonist as a thing to be used, rather than as a moral agent with equal dignity to everyone else, the antagonist becomes liable to harms which cannot prevent the primary threat because the protagonist is permitted to defend their honor.

Neither Statman nor Frowe say very much in the way of explicating the notion of honor and how it can be threatened. The closest either of them comes to this, it seems to me, is in the following passage from Statman:

Given the power of the aggressor and [their] ability to force [their] will upon us, we fear that by doing so [they] will quite literally degrade us. We feel that we must protect not only our body or our property but our *selves*. To reaffirm our honor in the face of such threats, we need more than abstract thoughts such as “I’m proud to be who I am, and nobody can diminish my inner sense of worth.” Concrete acts of resistance are needed in order to communicate to the aggressor, to ourselves, and to an actual or potential audience that we are not just passive objects to be trodden upon. By carrying out such acts we reaffirm, or protect, our honor.

This passage is suggestive, but light on detail. Threats to honor are threats to one’s “inner sense of worth,” and when one’s honor is threatened one needs to act in order to communicate, at least to oneself, that one still has worth. This much is clear, and insofar as it is clear I find it highly plausible. However, this passage leaves some questions unanswered. In the first place, neither Statman nor Frowe indicate whether the sense of honor or worth they employ is normatively laden. That is, it is unclear whether what is supposed to be threatened is how one actually regards oneself or how one ought to regard oneself. I will assume in what follows that they mean to employ a normatively laden sense of honor, because it is not clear

⁹Pitt-Rivers, 1966, quoted in Statman, 2008, p. 668.

¹⁰Statman, 2008, p. 669; Frowe, 2014, p. 109-10.

that preserving our actual attitudes of self-regard is of moral value. In the second place, and more importantly, Statman and Frowe assume that the actions of others can affect how we ought to regard ourselves but neither say anything about how the actions of others can do this. That is, they are silent on the nature of threats to honor.

Despite these unclaritys, I think that Statman and Frowe are correct in identifying a threat to our inner sense of worth (i.e. our honor) as justifying “ineffective” defensive action. In what follows I propose to fill out the details of what honor consists in, and what threats to honor consist in. As noted above, Statman and Frowe take honor to be a normatively laden sense of self-regard (it dictates how one ought to behave and how one ought to evaluate oneself). In my view honor, understood thus, can be profitably analyzed in terms of self-respect, which is itself a normatively laden sense of self-regard. Before turning to my analysis of threats to self-respect, I will discuss Thomas Hill’s account of symbolic protest in order to show that some symbolic protests should be understood as motivated by threats to self-respect.

5 Hill on Symbolic Protest

Thomas Hill offers an account of symbolic protest which, *prima facie*, has little to do with the relationship between symbolic protest and S. Nevertheless, a discussion of Hill’s account will prove fruitful. First because there are independent problems with his account, which my account of symbolic protest solves, and secondly because there is the possibility of a Hill-inspired account of symbolic protest which does have to do with S.

Hill’s line on symbolic protest is that the reason to engage in symbolic protest is to disassociate oneself from evil.¹¹ Where one has a prior association (in a somewhat weighty sense involving social or material contributions) with an evil or an evil-doer one has a reason

¹¹Hill, 1979, p.90.

to engage in symbolic protest so as to avoid white-washing the relevant evil or evil-doer.¹² According to Hill, if one fails to disassociate from evil, one will not be able to meaningfully associate with good.¹³

As noted above, Hill is not explicitly concerned with the relation between symbolic protest and S but given what he does say, the following line suggests itself: In cases where symbolic protest is justified, it is justified because there is a threat which it succeeds in averting, namely a threat to the protestor's ability to meaningfully associate with morally good individuals, groups, and institutions. On this view, when one is associated with evil, one is under a threat. Not a threat of physical or psychical harm, but rather a threat of a singularly moral nature. One's ability to meaningfully associate with morally good individuals, groups, and institutions is clearly morally valuable. *Pace* the Stoics, it seems clear enough that part of living a morally good life involves pursuing relationships with other individuals, and with institutions. Further, as Hill suggests, one's capacity to participate in morally valuable relationships is diminished if one has unrenounced ties to evil.

For example, consider someone who has significant investments in the companies responsible for the Dakota Access Pipeline. It seems to me that supporting the protestors at Standing Rock was part of living a morally good life for those living in the United States at the time. Returning to the aforementioned investor, it seems clear that absent extreme circumstances (such as being in a position to act directly at Standing Rock but not in a position to divest from the relevant companies), such a person could not have fulfilled their moral obligations with regard to the Standing Rock protestors without disassociating from the companies both by divesting from them financially and by encouraging others to do likewise. Any support extended by such a person might have been materially valuable to the protestors, but that person's life would be morally compromised unless they disassociated from the relevant evil-doers.

¹²Hill, 1979, p.98.

¹³Hill, 1979, p. 99.

For a less controversial example, consider someone who voluntarily retains their business ties to the mafia even after the mafia murders a member of their family. In addition to showing that the relevant person has a vile character, it seems that their ability to offer meaningful sympathy to their family is diminished if not destroyed entirely by their retaining their ties to organized crime.

Now, it is certainly true that at times utilitarian considerations may favor persisting in an association with evil for the sake of the greater good. Oskar Schindler, for example, was clearly permitted to retain his associations with the Nazis for the sake of saving more than a thousand Jewish lives. However, even in cases like Schindler's it would seem that one should do one's best to minimize one's support for the evil. Socializing with Nazis beyond the bare minimum required for keeping his factories, for example, would have compromised Schindler's support for the Jewish people. Similarly, keeping the factories running efficiently, rather than slowing them down (whether or not he did this, I do not know), would have compromised his actions.

However, Hill's account faces a problem when it comes to cases of symbolic protest wherein there is no prior association between the protestors and the evil-doers. Hill himself is explicit on this point, holding that ordinary people have no need to disassociate from the mafia. Where there is no prior association, there is no need to avoid whitewashing the relevant evil and one is not under a threat of being unable to meaningfully associate with good individuals (etc.). Thus Hill's account cannot explain what makes symbolic protest permissible (etc.) in cases like *Charlie Hebdo*. Since the *Charlie Hebdo* protestors were not associated with the terrorist attackers, they are not under the sort of threat that would make it permissible to engage in symbolic protest.

While Hill focuses on disassociation from evil, he also briefly discusses the notion that one ought to refuse to associate with evil individuals (etc) in the first place, and that this can sometimes motivate symbolic protest even in the absence of a prior association with

those who are responsible for the relevant injustice.¹⁴ *Prima facie*, this line might seem to avoid the *Charlie Hebdo* problem, but that seems wrong to me. The idea would be that in *Charlie Hebdo*, if the protagonist were to remain silent, then the protagonist would thereby become associated with the terrorist attackers. Were this conditional true, there would be a clear motivation for symbolic protest in *Charlie Hebdo*, namely that the protagonist faces becoming associated with evil which, as noted above, threatens one's morally valuable associations with good individuals (etc).

But it is false that were the protagonists of *Charlie Hebdo* to remain silent, they would thereby become associated with evil. According to Hill, refusal to associate involves denying the target of one's refusal "loyalty, trust, respect as an individual, social amenities, readiness to cooperate and compromise, and the various signs of being pleased to share in mutual projects." Further, he writes that the principle that one should refuse to associate with evil "favor[s] symbolic protest in situations where silence creates a presumption of normal social relations."¹⁵ But it can hardly be said that had the citizens of Paris remained silent, they would have counted as extending normal social relations to the terrorists. In general, we do not, and should not, expect everyone to protest every crime committed in their cities. But if silence in *Charlie Hebdo* amounts to association, it is hard to see why we should not expect this. I conclude, therefore, that Hill's account cannot accommodate the verdict in *Charlie Hebdo*, and therefore is to be rejected as a general account of symbolic protest. Hill is correct in thinking that where one has a prior strong association with evil that association motivates symbolic protest, but that is not the only thing that can motivate symbolic protest.

As things stand, both accounts of "ineffective" action hitherto discussed stand in need of modification. Hill's account of symbolic protest leaves out important cases in which symbolic protest is not motivated by disassociation from evil, and Statman and Frowe's account stands in need of clarification. In the following sections I will provide an account (1) which serves

¹⁴Hill, 1979, p. 93.

¹⁵Hill, 1979, p. 94.

to accommodate the cases of symbolic protest that Hill leaves out and (2) which clarifies the notion of honor upon which Statman and Frowe rely. I propose to accomplish these goals by focusing on the notion of self-respect.

6 Self-Respect

In this section I will distinguish a number of kinds of self-respect before turning, in the next section, to a discussion of threats to self-respect. Throughout I will assume that having full self-respect requires meeting certain objective standards but that failure to have full self-respect comes in degrees depending upon how closely one approximates the objective standards.

The two main kinds of self-respect, recognition self-respect and evaluative self-respect, involve different kinds of worth which are ascribed to persons.¹⁶ Recognition self-respect involves worth which derives from one's membership in certain kinds. For example in virtue of membership in the kind *person*, individuals who are persons possess (arguably) *dignity* in a Kantian sense. Recognition self-respect involves recognizing that one has certain statuses (e.g. person, agent) which both confer worth and impose moral constraints. More precisely, recognition respect for oneself involves:¹⁷

1. Recognizing that one is a person.
2. Appreciating that persons as such have intrinsic moral value and appreciating one's own fundamental worth.
3. Understanding that the fact that one is a person morally constrains one's actions and the actions of others.
4. Acting or being disposed to act only in fitting ways out of that recognition, apprecia-

¹⁶This distinction owes originally to Darwall, 1977. See also Dillon 1992, 2016.

¹⁷Dillon, 1992, p. 133.

tion, and understanding.

Fully explicating these points requires a further division of kinds of recognition self-respect. I will undertake this task in the next section. For now it will suffice to mention the more specific statuses which ground the further division. In order to fully satisfy 1-4 one must recognize one's standing as a member of the moral community, one must recognize one's status as an agent, and one must recognize one's status as an autonomous individual. An example of someone with recognition respect would be a person who cultivates moral virtues because they believe that that is what persons ought to do. In cultivating virtues, one recognizes that one is an autonomous person and one takes that fact to constrain what one can permissibly do and to also set injunctions about what one ought to do. Further, one who cultivates the virtues is disposed to act in accordance with them precisely because they recognize that the virtues set constraints on persons.

Evaluative self-respect involves acquired worth, worth which depends not on one's membership in a kind but rather upon the nature of one's conduct or moral character.¹⁸ Where recognition self-respect requires one to recognize one's moral status, evaluative self-respect requires one to self-scrutinize in order to maintain one's confidence that one's conduct comes up to scratch. One must, as Hume put it, "bear their own survey."¹⁹ The person with full recognition self-respect strives to live as befits a person. The person with full evaluative self-respect judges, correctly and in a well-founded way, that they are succeeding in meeting their standards. An example of someone with evaluative self-respect would be someone who takes their moral development in view, with reference to the standards they take to be morally constraining. One shows evaluative self-respect by self-scrutinizing, and one way of doing this is by assessing how one is doing relative to one's moral standards.

¹⁸Dillon, 1992, p. 134, 2016, s. 4.

¹⁹Dillon, 2016, s. 4; Hume, 1739 (1971), p. 620.

6.1 Three Kinds of Recognition Self-Respect

Recognition self-respect divides into (at least) three distinct but interrelated sorts, interpersonal, agentic, and personal, grounded in various statuses that persons have. I will now briefly characterize the varieties of recognition self-respect before discussing evaluative self-respect.

Interpersonal self-respect involves recognizing that one is a “person among persons,” a member of the moral community with equal status and dignity to every other person.²⁰ More precisely, necessarily one has interpersonal self-respect if and only if:

ISR1 One recognizes that oneself is a person with equal moral status to every other person.

ISR2 One has a conception of what sorts of treatment befit a person and what sorts of treatment are degrading.

ISR3 One acts in accordance with one’s conception of befitting and degrading treatment.

Components two and three are, as I see it, crucial to understanding the nature of interpersonal self-respect. The idea is that one fails to respect oneself if one does not require certain treatment from others, where this requirement is manifest in one’s behavior. Failure to respond appropriately (i.e. in accordance with the standards of objective self-respect) to what one regards as degrading (or befitting) treatment manifests a kind of self-deprecation which is incompatible with having full, or even relatively uncompromised, interpersonal self-respect. The idea is that it is not enough simply to regard some treatment as degrading if one goes on to accept that degrading treatment.

Agentic self-respect involves recognizing one’s autonomous capacities for valuing and action and living in light of that autonomy. More precisely, necessarily one has agentic self-respect if and only if:

²⁰Dillon, 1992, p. 133, 2016, s. 4; Thomas 1983a; Boxill, 1976; Hill, 1973.

ASR1 One recognizes that one is an agent, capable of directing one's actions.

ASR2 One has a conception of what sorts of actions are befitting of a person and what sorts of action are degrading.

ASR3 One acts in accordance with one's conception of befitting and degrading actions.

Again, components two and three are crucial. It is not enough to simply recognize one's agency but to regard all actions as being acceptable. Living in that way would manifest a lack of respect for oneself because there would be no level to which such a person would not be willing to sink if it served their purposes. Respecting oneself requires one to have standards regarding right and wrong action. If one possesses agentic self-respect one will abide by one's standards.²¹ Having full agentic self-respect requires satisfying a lengthy set of conditions, the full details of which are not relevant here.²² The key points are these: agentic self-respect requires one to exercise and protect one's capacity for agency and to strive to be autonomous.²³ These requirements are manifest in components two and three above.

Finally, personal self-respect involves recognizing that one is autonomously self-defining.²⁴

Necessarily, one has personal self-respect if and only if:

PSR1 One recognizes that one's goals, ideals, and aspirations (etc.) are under one's control.

PSR2 One has goals, ideals, and aspirations (etc.) which one regards as placing constraints on acceptable behavior.

PSR3 One acts in accordance with those constraints.

Where agentic self-respect involves living as befits a non-specific person, personal self-respect involves living in light of being the particular person one is. The difference lies in that

²¹Dillon, 1992, p. 133, 2016, s. 4; Taylor, 1985: Telfer, 1968

²²Dillon, 1992, p. 133-4.

²³Dillon, 1992, p. 133.

²⁴Dillon, 1992, p. 133, 2016, s. 4; Hill, 1982.

agentic self-respect sets constraints that apply to any person, i.e. which apply categorically, whereas personal self-respect sets constraints which apply given one's personal ideals and goals (i.e. which apply hypothetically). Not just any normative self-conception will do. In particular one's self-conception must be informed by the constraints set by having agentic and interpersonal self-respect. One does not count as having full personal self-respect if one has degraded standards.

The three kinds of recognition self-respect can come apart. One might, for example, have interpersonal self-respect without having personal self respect. Consider someone (an adult) who has a largely accurate conception of what sorts of treatment are degrading and what sorts are befitting of a person, and who acts accordingly, but who does very little to direct the course of his life. In particular, he lets his parents decide what he should do both on a day-to-day basis and on a long-term basis. Such a person seems to have interpersonal, and perhaps agentic self-respect but lacks personal self-respect. Consider now someone who has self-defined goals and aspirations and who regards certain forms of treatment as degrading and others as befitting in rough accord with the standards of interpersonal self-respect but who considers no possible action as beneath a person, if that person can get away with it. Such a person would lie, cheat, steal, and kill to get ahead and would regard none of that behavior as morally degrading. Individuals of this sort lack agentic self-respect but not personal or interpersonal self-respect. Or consider someone who believes that they should behave in certain ways and avoid other behaviors, and who has aspirations and goals, but who regards herself as beneath others in terms of what can acceptably be done to her. She lacks interpersonal self-respect but maintains personal and agentic self-respect.

To sum up, having full recognition self-respect requires one to recognize one's dignity as a person, to act in accordance with one's responsibilities as an agent, and to take one's life into one's own hands by having personal standards and goals which govern one's actions.

6.2 Evaluative Self-Respect

In having evaluative self-respect one “expresses confidence in one’s merit as a person.”²⁵ That is, where the various kinds of recognition self-respect involve having standards, evaluative self-respect involves appraising oneself and conduct in light of those standards. One merits, or fails to merit evaluative self-respect to the extent that one lives up to one’s standards. Evaluative self-respect thus bears a close relationship to recognition self-respect. One has evaluative self-respect insofar as (1) one appraises oneself in light of the standards of recognition self-respect, (2) one is confident in one’s standards, (3) one’s conduct lives up to one’s standards in one’s own eyes, (4) one is confident that one can continue to live up to those standards and (5) one is confident that one’s evaluative capacity is well functioning. Confidence of all three sorts is required on pain of being self-doubting.²⁶ The badness of self-doubt results from its ability to impede our living a meaningful life. Doubting any of (2), (4), and (5) diminishes the value of one’s evaluative self-respect, as will become clearer in the next section.

To see that evaluative self-respect is indeed a kind of self-respect, note that at least sometimes respecting another person requires evaluating them with respect to their conduct and character. Consider the relationship between parents and their young children. Parents, for better or for worse, are the moral custodians of their children. Imagine a parent who never evaluates the conduct and moral character of their child, despite taking care to impart only good moral advice to that child. This sort of parent remains content to let their child’s moral development be subject to luck when they could have done otherwise. Luck is involved because is a matter of luck whether their lessons “stick,” but in providing evaluation and correction as well as moral advice could reduce the influence of luck. Thus, it seems that in failing to evaluate their child, the parent shows a lack of respect for their child as an individual that is a moral agent but who is not fully capable of directing their own moral

²⁵Dillon, 2016, s. 4.

²⁶Dillon, 1992, p. 129.

development (at least when very young). But whether or not one is a parent, one is still one's own moral custodian. One is responsible for making sure that one is living a moral life. Since this is so, one stands in relation to their own moral character much as a parent stands in relation to their child's moral character, and thus one manifests a lack of respect for oneself if one fails to self-evaluate.

6.3 The Value of Self-Respect

Robin Dillon, 1992, outlines several aspects of the value of self-respect.²⁷ I will briefly canvas that discussion here before turning to threats to self-respect in the next section. First, self-respect is psychologically valuable. As Rawls notes, self-respect allows us to pursue our life plans with vigor.²⁸ More importantly, however, Dillon argues that self-respect is morally valuable as well.

Recognition self-respect is valuable partly because it involves appreciating features of oneself that are of profound moral value, namely one's individuality, agency, and moral equality.²⁹ These things are worthy of respect, and proper appreciation of them is partly constitutive of living the best sort of life for beings like us. In failing to have recognition self-respect, or in having severely compromised recognition self-respect, one is cut off from these intrinsic goods and therefore from the good life. Similar remarks apply to evaluative self-respect. If one lacks evaluative self-respect one will not have a proper appreciation of their good actions and character. As with the objects of recognition self-respect, the objects of uncompromised evaluative self-respect are morally worthy and part of living the best sort of life for beings like us involves understanding the worth of one's actions and character. Lacking self-respect of either sort thus reduces one to a morally degraded state.

Following Nozick, Dillon takes it that our capacity to seek and respond to value are

²⁷Dillon, 1992, p. 134-7.

²⁸Rawls, 1971, p.178.

²⁹Dillon, 1992, p. 135.

fundamental to our being moral beings.³⁰ This grounds a further value of self-respect, which is that in respecting oneself and in caring about that respect one “respond[s] to the values of human living in such a way that one’s life is guided and shaped by value.”³¹ This, Dillon notes, is how value-seeking beings ought to live. Damage to one’s capacity to live in such a way is, therefore, is profoundly harmful. One cannot live a good life if one cannot live how one ought to live.

Evaluative self-respect has a further value in that it is essential to answering questions of profound importance such as, “What kind of person ought I to be?” and, “What kind of life is worth living?”³² Answers to these questions, and others of similar sorts, gain significance not by being apprehended in the abstract but by being lived and thereby tested against experience.³³ If one’s evaluative self-respect is compromised one will be unable to tell if one is getting it right or, as Dillon puts it, if one is being “the best sort of person living the best sort of life.”³⁴ This is a further way in which evaluative self-respect is essential for living the good life.

Having a clearer picture of the value of self-respect, I will briefly return to self-doubt before discussing threats to self-respect. Supposing that one has both good conduct and character, having uncompromised evaluative self-respect puts one in cognitive contact with one’s good actions and character, which is intrinsically good and part of the good life, as noted above. If one doubts one’s standards, or one’s ability to judge, or one’s ability to keep living up to one’s standards one will not properly appreciate the value of their good actions and character. In addition, it seems clear that one’s capacity to answer the questions from the preceding paragraph will be impaired if one doubts in any of the aforementioned ways. As a result, one’s capacity to be the best sort of person living the best sort of life is thereby diminished. This, then, is the badness of self-doubt. In addition to any psychological harm

³⁰Dillon, 1992, p. 135; Nozick, 1981, p. 457f.

³¹Dillon, 1992, p. 135.

³²Dillon, 1992, p. 136.

³³Dillon, 1992, p. 136.

³⁴Dillon, 1992, p. 136.

that may result, self-doubt involves a kind of moral harm as well. This, it seems to me, is one of the keys to understanding threats to self-respect.

6.4 Threats to Self-Respect and the Success Condition

Having canvassed the varieties of self-respect and having established their moral value, we are now in a position to see what a threat to self-respect consists in. I will argue that the threat to self-respect is fourfold, with one branch threatening recognition self-respect, two threatening evaluative self-respect, and the final branch having to do with both sorts of respect. The general idea behind the threats to self-respect is that in subjecting an individual to degrading treatment, one forces them to either act in accordance with the standards of self-respect or else to lie passive in the face of that treatment, and lying passive in this way carries with it moral harms. But one is not obligated to accept those harms. Indeed, granted that one is obligated to respect oneself, one is obligated by the standards of recognition self-respect to reject one's treatment. Since it is permissible to meet one's obligations, it is permissible to administer proportionate harms in cases in which one's self-respect is threatened. Moreover, such the administration of such harms counts as a justified act of self-defense because in meeting one's obligations to respect oneself, one successfully mitigates the threats to self-respect.

First, lying passive in the face of degrading treatment or evil manifests a lack of recognition self-respect, at least in ideal circumstances.³⁵ In lying passive, one manifests a failure to act in accordance with the standards of agentic and interpersonal self-respect. In both cases, having self-respect requires the expression of agency as well as having a conception of appropriate and inappropriate treatment/actions. If one lies passive in the face of degradation one will thereby be partly cut off from the intrinsic goods of one's equality and agency because one

³⁵Circumstances, that is, in which one knows that one will not be harmed or degraded further if one resists than if one lies passive. See section eight below for more on ideal and non-ideal circumstances and why this account does not entail objectionable victim blaming.

will have voluntarily acted in a way contrary to the standards of self-respect. But if one takes action, even ineffective action, one manifests their commitment (to themselves, at least) to the standards of interpersonal and agentic self-respect.

With regard to evaluative self-respect, the first threat is grounded in the standards set by full recognition self-respect. Given those standards, if one lies passive in the face of degrading treatment (or in the face of evil) one's conduct will not live up to one's standards in one's own eyes. Thus, if one is a scrupulous self-scrutinizer, one will lose some evaluative self-respect. That is, one will be ashamed, where shame is the moral state one occupies when one's evaluative self-respect is diminished from what it once was. But one is not obligated to accept shame in the light of degrading treatment, and one may express one's agency as a way of defending against the threat of shame.³⁶

In the second place, lying passive in the face of degrading treatment may shake one's confidence in their ability to keep living up to their standards. If one accepts degradation once, one may reasonably wonder whether one will do so again. Moreover, given the way human beings are wired up one may lose confidence in this regard whether or not it is reasonable, trauma being traumatic. Thus, degrading threats carry with them a threat of self-doubt, which is a kind of morally degraded condition in which one cannot appropriately respond to the value of one's conduct, character, and self. However, if one takes what action one can, even "ineffective" action, one will be able to reassure oneself that one did one's best.

Dillon identifies a further threat involving, it seems to me, both evaluative self-respect and recognition self-respect. She writes, "being degraded carries the threat that one will come to accept the low valuation of oneself and then [...] lose the ability to tell what has worth. The real harm of degradation thus lies in its potential to destroy or warp our value-seeking

³⁶Again, with the caveat that in many ordinary situations lying passive in the face of degradation may be thoroughly excusable, and therefore in many ordinary situations people who lie passive will not be subject to shame.

capacity, and hence to render our lives meaningless in the most radical sense.”³⁷ The idea, I take it, is that in lying passive in the face of degrading treatment, one runs the risk that one will internalize that treatment, thereby diminishing one’s ability to respond appropriately to value, as well as one’s ability to tell what has value in the first place. If one comes to accept the low valuation of oneself one may fail to live up to the standards of recognition self-respect by coming to accept degraded standards of interpersonal treatment and personal agency. Further, if one comes to accept the low valuation of oneself one may wrongly lose evaluative self-respect. One might, for example, come to think that one can never meet one’s standards, or that one has failed in a way that can never be recovered from. If, however, one expresses one’s agency in the face of degradation one will have forcefully rejected the low valuation of oneself imposed by one’s degrader.

Degrading threats thus carry four further, and distinct, threats of moral harm. In addition to whatever physical and psychological harm is threatened, one is threatened (1) with being cut off from intrinsic goods, the proper appreciation of which is essential to living the best sort of life, (2) with the threat of shame, (3) with the threat of self-doubt, and (4) with the threat of accepting degradation. Whatever its other value, putatively ineffective action is morally valuable, as well as successful, because it blocks these threats. To further illustrate this, let’s return to the cases.

Consider Anti-Fascist. In this case the protagonist faces a threat of degradation not because of a manifest threat, but rather because of a conditional one. If she publicly protests, then she will be arrested. This condition itself constitutes an unjust restriction on her autonomy and is therefore degrading. Further, given the constraints of interpersonal and agentic self-respect, she must regard action against the Nazi’s as morally required of her, since the Nazi’s treatment of Jews is degrading and evil. The Nazi’s, therefore, threaten her with degradation. If she does not engage in symbolic protest, her behavior will manifest a lack of full recognition self-respect, because that requires one to act in accordance with

³⁷Dillon, 1992, p. 135.

how one is treated, and accepting unjust degradation is not appropriate. Further, if her standards approximate the objective standards, she must regard lying passive in the face of this treatment as beneath her, thus if she lies passive she will lose evaluative self-respect. Finally, she may come to doubt her ability to live up to her standards in the future. But if she protests, she can block these threats. Thus, the success condition is in fact satisfied in Anti-Fascist.

Consider *Charlie Hebdo*. In this case, the protagonists faced a threat of degradation owing to the fact that the terrorists put them in a position of having to choose between putting themselves at risk or lying passive in the face of treatment that must be regarded, on grounds of interpersonal self-respect, as unacceptable. In *Charlie Hebdo* the citizens of Paris were subjected to a terror attack directly aimed at curtailing their speech, and thus their agency. Had they lain silent in the face of that treatment, they would have manifested the failures of self-respect which constitute the threats outlined above, but by taking action and reaffirming their commitment to liberty and freedom of expression they defended themselves against the moral harms imposed by the attackers.

Now consider Rape. The structure of the threat to self-respect differs from that in *Charlie Hebdo* because the threat to honor is carried by a more severe and more direct threat to the protagonist. This allows Fran to undertake significantly more harmful actions to defend her self-respect than anything that would be allowed in the cases of symbolic protest. The more one's agency is degraded, the more one may do in order to defend their respect for it. In general, the badness of a threat to self-respect is largely, but not entirely, dependent on the badness of the primary threat which grounds the threat to self-respect.³⁸

I take it that I have shown that S is in fact satisfied in all of the cases hitherto discussed, and thus that the actions undertaken in each case are permissible.

³⁸Statman, 2008, p. 61., and Frowe, 2014, p. 110, also hold that the seriousness of the secondary threat (to honor, on their account) is dependent on the seriousness of the primary threat.

7 Obligations to Act Ineffectively

I have thus far argued that ineffective action is permissible. However, one might question whether one is obligated to act ineffectively on grounds of self-respect. W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington debated this question, with DuBois arguing that self-respect requires one to protest one's injustices in the absence of effective responses to the primary threat and Washington arguing that such protests should be eschewed in favor of stoic dignity.³⁹ Washington thought that protest, in the form of insisting on civil rights, was a matter of trying to rely on the sympathy of others.⁴⁰ Instead of protest, Washington argued that black people in America should focus on industry and acquiring wealth, and thereby respectability.⁴¹ DuBois, however, wrote that Washington faced a paradox because, "He insist[ed] on [...] self-respect, but at the same time counsel[ed] a silent submission to civic inferiority."⁴² I will now argue that self-respect only obligates one to action in a conditional way.

The condition which must be satisfied for ineffective action to be morally obligatory is that one's values have to be such that *action* as opposed to refraining from action, is required. If, for example, one is a pacifist (and supposing that pacifism is compatible with self-respect), then one might express one's agency in the face of degrading treatment, and thereby defend against a threat to self-respect, by refraining from violence even in the face of the most horrific treatment. For a further case, consider someone who has been condemned to death by public hanging. They might express their agency by refraining from showing emotion in the face of the expectations of the crowd. Or consider Booker T. Washington's emphasis on maintaining stoic dignity in the face of treatment one can do nothing about.⁴³ Perhaps this represents a permissible ideal that one might adhere to best by refraining from

³⁹W.E.B. DuBois ("Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," in *Negro Social and Political Thought 1850-1920*, ed. Howard Brotz (New York, 1966), p. 514), Boxill, (1976, 1992)

⁴⁰Boxill, 1976, p. 58.

⁴¹DuBois, 2011, p. 27.

⁴²DuBois, 2011, p. 33.

⁴³Boxill, 1976, p. 58.

protest. The general idea here is that for all I've said about self-respect, it is possible to have both full self-respect and to have conceptions of appropriate personal behavior which hold that one should not ever administer violent harms no matter what. That is, agentic and personal self-respect are both, for all I have said, compatible with pacifism. But if this is so, and since one defends against threats to self-respect acting in accordance with one's conception of appropriate behavior, it would seem that, if pacifism is indeed compatible with full self-respect, one way to retain one's full self-respect is to refuse to do violence.

One is not, therefore, unconditionally obligated to *act* ineffectively, although one is obligated to express one's agency, at least when one knows that in so doing they will not be degraded further. Whether that expression takes the form of action or refraining from action depends upon one's values.

8 Blaming the Victim?

One might worry that there is something of blaming the victim about accounts of the sort Statman and I offer. In particular, one might worry that accounts of this sort place an undue moral obligation on victims of degrading attacks, namely the obligation to express their agency. If so, and if one is to blame for failing to meet one's obligations when one is in a position to meet them, then it would seem that my account (and Statman's) runs afoul of the intuition that one should not be subject to blame for being the victim of violent and degrading attacks. However, this is not the case for people in the large majority of cases.

The only cases in which the protagonist is subject to blame for failing to express their agency in the face of degrading treatment are cases in which (1) the protagonist reasonably believes that attempting to defend their self-respect will not result in a greater overall harm in the form of further primary threats and further threats to self-respect and, of course, (2)

the protagonist is a morally responsible agent at the time of the primary threat. But it seems to me that at least one of these conditions will fail to be satisfied in virtually any ordinary case. In many ordinary cases, (1) will not be satisfied. That is, in many cases the protagonist might reasonably believe that they will be harmed and degraded to a greater extent if they try to resist. Or, at least, they may not be in a position to reasonably believe that things will not get worse if they resist. But one is not obligated to act in accordance with self-respect if a consequence of so acting is that one's self-respect will be further degraded.

More importantly, in many (perhaps most) ordinary cases of rape or other forms of violent treatment one might not be in a position to exercise one's agency at all. One might be in shock or otherwise involuntarily incapacitated, and therefore not subject to moral blame for failing to do something during that time period.

My account thus does not subject individuals in ordinary cases to blame if they fail to express their agency, though it does have the result that in cases where (1) and (2) are satisfied, i.e. in ideal cases, individuals would be subject to some blame for failing to express their agency. This does not entail, however, any degree of moral reprieve for those who pose the degrading threats in the first place. This is a further sense in which my account does not entail objectionable victim blaming.

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